

AUTISM IN AMERICA

One Woman's Search for Healing

(A Trauma Informed Guide to Systemic Oppression)

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Autism in America: One Woman's Search for Healing (A
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Disclaimer: This book integrates memoir, theory, and public-facing
scholarship. Where legal or clinical matters are discussed, readers
should consult appropriate professionals for advice. These essays are
offered as living inquiries, not finished answers.



Autism In America

For the Universe
And for Keaton Bicknell
I love you

Autism In America

In loving memory of
Ramona Rose Ann Hales née Arford

Dedicated to my children

Andrew

Gwen

Allen

Bear

Cole

Miles

Theo

((((ho'oponopono)))

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“Academic and “professional” spaces are not SAFE for freedom of speech. AND not all of us have the luxury to speak freely without getting penalized by being called radicals, too emotional, angry and/or accused of being not “professional” enough. In true decolonization work, one burns the shit down- at the risk of losing our job. Stating that we practice decolonizing is NOT enough. It is not a surprise that even those engaged in decolonizing methods replicate the Master’s tools...In its place I call for Accountability. Collective reciprocity. Love. Communication. Meditation in the form of group circles. Trust building. Solid organizing skills. Emotional transparency. Intuitive vulnerability. And as close to equitable exchanges void of power dynamics and labels, as possible. But this would require us to call OUT the Eurocentric Narcissism, and call IN one another.”
-Decolonizing Therapy (2019)

The First Amendment

**“Congress shall make no law
respecting an establishment of
religion, or prohibiting the free
exercise thereof; or abridging
the freedom of speech, or of the
press, or of the right of the
people peaceably to assemble,
and to petition the Government
for a redress of grievances.”**

Yates v. United States (1957)

The Supreme Court ruled that advocating an abstract idea of revolution (for example, discussing Marxist theory or the eventual overthrow of capitalism) is protected speech.

Introduction

"We make our world significant by the courage of our questions and the depth of our answers."

- Carl Sagan, "Cosmos"

My father told my mother, "Something's wrong with that kid, you need to get her checked out," when I was three years old, but Mom told him at the time that she didn't want me to go through my life "saddled with a diagnosis" and labelled by others. I've often wondered how my life would be different if she had made a different choice, or if my dad had pressed the issue, but with the growing fear I now feel while living in what increasingly appears to be a fascist country actively practicing eugenics and culling the herd (by refusing vaccinations to the elderly or disappearing immigrants from hastily assembled internment camps on American and indigenous soil), sometimes I think she may have been right to insist on my conformity, even though at the time she was coming from a very ableist place. Aspergers wasn't even included in the DSM until 1994, which would have been when I was 14 years old, so if I had been seen by a professional earlier, the chances are I would have been misdiagnosed, if I had been diagnosed with anything at all. It's worth noting that the condition was named after Hans Asperger, a known eugenicist, who created the designation to determine which autistics were still capable of being put to work in labor camps in Nazi Germany. Historical research, especially Herwig Czech's landmark 2018 article in

Molecular Autism, revealed that Asperger was indeed complicit in Nazi programs. He worked in Vienna during the Nazi era and cooperated with the system of racial hygiene and eugenics. It is further imperative to note that two decades before Asperger and Leo Kanner, a woman named Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva was the first to publish a clinical description of autistic traits in 1925. Her work being suppressed due to her status as a Jewish woman and citizen of the USSR by German men firmly establishes the origins of autism as an intersectional and feminist issue.

Post-colonial theory describes how "us" vs. "them" dichotomies are created and used to legitimize uneven power dynamics between social groups, making it integral to any discussion about autism. New research reframes the diagnosis of autism as pathologized evolution (Chambers, 2025). @autismoutloud, an Instagram account run by Mercedes Palero, has stated that "many Indigenous worldviews emphasize interconnectedness, community, and respect for every person's role, rather than individual achievement. Some Elders describe neurodivergent people as having unique strengths or perspectives valuable to the whole community, rather than deficits" (2025). The book *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics* by Jess Whatcott (2024) argues that the ideology and practices of eugenics, especially as understood in the early 20th century, were intimately tied to state institutions that confined, marginalized, and controlled disabled, mad, neurodivergent, and queer people. Whatcott coins (or at least systematizes) the term "carceral eugenics" to name how confinement and reproductive surveillance were (and remain) tools to regulate "undesirable" bodies and behaviors. These tools include confinement, coercive treatment, care neglect, and forced sterilization through institutions such as psychiatric treatment facilities, state prisons, and immigration detention centers where the legacy of these ideas continue to be shaped by the Western cultural myth of normalcy, which creates fears and judgments towards members that society deems unfit. These observations are particularly significant considering that for the first time in our 249-year history, the United States of America was placed on the Human Rights Watch List in 2025. Lauren Tenney's forthcoming book *Except as A Punishment: Psycarceration — Reconsidering U.S. Psychiatry in Its Historical Moments and Contexts* isolates Psychiatry's historical moments and then follows those moments through their contexts. Aspergers was removed as a psychiatric official

label in 2013 when the DSM-5 replaced it with the single, umbrella diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The DSM-5 introduced specifiers for intellectual and language impairment under the ASD category to provide a more consistent diagnostic process. I was officially diagnosed with Aspergers at the age of 26 in 2007, a time when it was still fairly rare to be diagnosed with autism or Aspergers as a woman or girl, because all of the diagnostic criteria and medical research up until that point had been primarily focused on the male gender. There were little to no services or support for adult autistics in general, thus my experience as an autistic individual is completely different from someone who had a diagnosis, support and services while growing up. Rather than receive help and understanding, my family blamed me for my unnamed dysregulated, out of control or “odd” behaviors, turning me into the family scapegoat rather than getting curious and taking accountability for how I might be reacting to a controlling and oppressive, frightening and confusing, overstimulating and under supportive environment. I was kicked out a total of 8 times starting when I was 12 years old, and when I was 16 my own mother pointed a gun at me. A year earlier my stepfather had punched me in the face and broken my glasses on a family vacation. My father, likely undiagnosed with autism himself, was completely emotionally checked out during my childhood, was never really present and couldn’t connect with me. Like many girls, I was coerced into inappropriate sexual conduct by older boys and men who were familiar and known to the family before the onset of puberty. My ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) score is an 8.

When I got my diagnosis, I thought it would magically unlock the understanding and acceptance my family of origin had denied me, but to my utter shock and dismay, it only made the disrespect worse and seemed to give my parents carte blanche to infantilize me more. For me, my diagnosis was positive, the answer I’d been waiting for that unlocked self-forgiveness and grace, that gave me new tools and coping skills, along with increased self-knowledge and awareness. I couldn’t understand and thus was unable to anticipate being looked down on and diminished further because of it. Internalized ableism in my family along with the projection of that on me by my parents are likely factors. *What if Our Mothers Were Undiagnosed Too?* (2025) posted on LinkedIn by Bridgette Hamstead, MS, award winning Global Neurodiversity Justice

Leader, asks an important question: what if rather than abusive villains, our mothers are just traumatized and neurodivergent women who are undiagnosed while chronically and systemically under supported? This query has also been on my mind for many years as it was true for my mother, who went undiagnosed my entire childhood, and was only officially diagnosed with bipolar a couple of years before she committed suicide (or as they say these days, made the choice to un-alive herself) in 2018. Because I went undiagnosed until this year, I am currently learning about ADHD and how it can present differently in women, sometimes heightening emotional sensitivities and responses resulting in a mimicking of borderline personality disorder (BPD) or bipolar symptoms. I suspect that, like myself, my mother may have just been a very traumatized and unsupported girl with ADHD as a child. Having C-PTSD and undiagnosed and unsupported neurodivergence would account for Mom's attachment trauma manifesting in her adult relationship with me as hot and cold, off and on, back and forth, walking on eggshells, avoiding difficult topics of discussion, explosive angry outbursts, push/pull, close and distant relational dynamics which I not only experienced in childhood but have continued to replicate as disorganized attachment in my own adult relationships.

Dr. Dawn Prince-Hughes, Anthropologist and autistic American, has remarked "I know this is true of my mother. My opinion is that she was literally driven insane over a lifetime of the very kinds of hell that we went through, but with no answers, ever. That does not excuse her bad actions. I have certainly done things I regret, things that were the direct result of not being identified and having the accommodations I needed, facing scathing prejudice, etc. But so many of us in this generation did the work. And there was nothing easy about it" (D. Prince-Hughes, personal communication via Facebook, 2025). What would change if we collectively started giving women and mothers in society the language for their needs, and actively started acting to meet those needs as a culture? "The most effective response to trauma is asking "what happened to you, how can I help," not saying "what's wrong with you." Most often, an empathic and restorative response aimed at addressing the underlying barriers yields better responses" (Webb, 2025).

When autistic individuals become adults, support seems to shut down, but new struggles are being created while existing ones still

remain. This failure to provide support during a crucial life transition may be a factor in America's nationwide epidemic of citizens without homes or adequate housing resources. I had difficulty locating any autism specific services once I had acquired my diagnosis outside of traditional therapy, and hardly any therapists at the time even knew what Aspergers was or how autism specifically presented in women, but I soon found Myspace, LiveJournal and Yahoo IM groups online with members who identified as autistic, and in getting to know them and talking to them I realized they had experiences just like me. The commonality of shared social struggles perhaps somewhat ironically had socially bonded me to the online autistic community, and suddenly autism was no longer just a diagnosis that described symptoms I experienced or a deficit in some way, it became an identity and a badge of belonging to something bigger than myself, a connected web of self-advocates and individuals who could relate scattered across the globe but brought together virtually online. This was somewhat helpful, but what I really needed and still need were life skills classes, financial coaching, mentorship, guidance and in person social support. One of the main reasons I decided to go back to school and study social sciences recently was to learn how to create the supportive services that I need for myself and others like me who could also benefit, like my autistic children. Many parents of autistic children worry what will happen when their kids "age out" of services, because most interventions are only offered to school aged autistic children. This leaves a widening gap of concern for parents who now face threats to Medicaid, cuts to the Education Department, and worry daily for their children's continued futures and safety.

When I was first diagnosed there were hardly any books about autism out yet, and the term neurodivergent was practically brand new; it's generally attributed to Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, who used it in her 1998 honors thesis when I was 18. I had the perception of being swept up into a social and political movement that was actively unfolding, and I was part of that happening, which was exciting and a little scary. Most of my knowledge came from support groups and other autistic adults that I found on the internet. My late diagnosis came shortly on the heels of my second daughter's early diagnosis at the age of 3. I'm embarrassed to admit that when she was first diagnosed with autism, I grieved the idea of a child she never was. I had a lot of internalized

ableism from my family of origin to heal, and this ended up being the catalyst. I reached out to friends and family for support and resources, was proactive in her therapies, and the more I learned about autism, especially in regards to how it presents differently in girls, the more I felt I was reading about my own childhood. And I realized that I had been taught to hate myself.

As a child I was quiet and withdrawn and always had my nose in a book. Extremely socially anxious, when we went out to eat at restaurants, I would tell the adults what to order for me so as to avoid talking to servers directly because the idea of new people seemed scary. I often went selectively mute at home, and frequently shut down when stressed, becoming nonresponsive and non-verbal at times. I loved to write stories and had a detailed imaginary world that I spent most of my time in and didn't have many friends, most of the children I knew were kind to me when others were looking, but when the adults were gone, I would get ganged up on and pushed into the creek and laughed at, or invited to sleepovers only for toothpaste and shaving cream to be on my face and pillow when I woke up. Even if my parents and teachers didn't know about my diagnosis yet, somehow all of the children my age seemed to pick up on the fact that I was different, awkward, unfit for basic human companionship. I spent most of my elementary school recess breaks far away from the rest of the children playing on the playground, way back at the end of the soccer field, where I would pick daisies and pretend, I was a unicorn. Kids my age rarely talked to me, but I always had one or two people I could talk to and that was enough for me. In junior high, the most magical boy met me at a friend of a friend's birthday party, and a year later after I'd gone to high school, he became my life's greatest heartbreak. There are so many points in time I look back on my life and think to myself, "what if they had known back then?" Would it have mattered, and would anything have been different? I often wonder how many relationships I've lost due to being undiagnosed still or misdiagnosed at the time, but that line of thinking leads me to question why people in society need a diagnosis or an explanation before they're willing to extend grace, empathy and understanding?

There is significant overlap in symptomology between autism and trauma, because autistic difficulties in social interactions equate to experiencing social and relational trauma as an inherent part of the

autistic experience. I spent my whole entire early life feeling like I was missing some mysterious yet significant key part of being human, but no one would ever clue me in to what it was. It was like everyone was in on a big joke and understood the punchline except me. I just didn't get why I couldn't get people, try as hard as I might, I couldn't seem to connect. It's like I existed in another dimension, only able to be perceived and experienced on this plane as a ghost. I lived as a social pariah and exile for most of my childhood, and then when I was a teenager my mother started kicking me out of the home, which means that my chances to experience socialization and opportunities to learn how to be a fully functional human being were significantly limited in addition to the challenges I was experiencing from the yet-unknown-at-the-time but obvious-in-retrospect autism diagnosis.

I ended up trying to go to college at least four separate times in my early 20's but dropped out each time due to the lack of social support, and then had my first baby when I was far too young to be a mother and before I knew the name for why people treated me differently. To me, that's ultimately what autism is, not so much an identity, a label, or even a symptomology or pathology. To the rest of the world, autism describes the difficulties other people have in understanding me or tolerating me perhaps. But from my perspective, autism describes the difficulties that I've experienced socially essentially since birth in being understood, and I wish that medical literature and science framed it that way instead of pathologizing me for it. From my perspective I typically am well intentioned, have a huge heart, am kind, generous and helpful, and I honestly have no clue what I'm doing wrong; after all these years I really wish someone would tell me so I could just fix it. I just want to belong and have friends like everyone else, but repeated losses of loved ones and people I cared for resulted in developing a special interest around the ways that we relate to each other in our culture.

Being born in a low socioeconomic class means that my life chances and opportunities were reduced because I had to make choices from survival, meaning they were influenced by outside cultural and systemic forces that diminish one's sense of agency and belief in their ability to take effective actions. When I was first diagnosed with Aspergers, I already had three children from two different men, neither of whom stuck around. I still have a lot of envy at times for early diagnosed autistic folks

who were raised with guidance and protection. I wish I had people to help teach me how to make good choices. I am 46 years old now and still struggling in life because I was systematically denied my chance to fully develop into a human being. Fully developing takes having a social safety net, and I've never known what that's like. My mother committed suicide in 2018, and in my grief after her passing I began to realize that as an adult I had turned into her, the person who had hurt me the most in my childhood. Her authoritarian parenting style and the frequent physical abuse I'd been subjected to made me unequipped in skill to discipline my own children, and because I didn't want to be the bad guy, I then ended up remarrying someone who was - both comfortable in an authoritarian role disciplining our children and just a bad guy in general. This caused me to both replicate my abusive childhood dynamics in my own home as an adult and become complicit in my children's abuse, but I didn't realize that at the time, because authoritarian parenting in a high conflict home was normal to me and how I'd been brought up. I missed all the red flags in the beginning, and then ended up married for a decade to a guy who treated me just like my parents had. But I was attracted to that, because to me that's what love was.

When Mom died, a whole lot of bad things happened all at once. After we settled her affairs, I got unexpectedly pregnant, then my earlier breast cancer, which I had been diagnosed with in 2015, came back in 2019 and I ended up needing a bilateral mastectomy shortly after my sixth and final baby was born. It was around that time that my autistic daughter, now a teenager, ran away from home claiming that bad guy, her stepfather, was molesting her. I started demanding a divorce, but he kept moving the goalposts and ultimately refused, escalating his abuse, causing me to become highly reactive. I was then coercively raped by my husband, the bank accounts were strategically emptied before he went to his brother's house for a weekend and he returned with police who served me with a restraining order, removing me from the home that I had recently bought for our family. He effectively stole my children, my house, my life, and all my things from me in an instant. None of my things were ever returned to me, and have all been destroyed by him since. My older children didn't have an issue with the way things had been because just like me with my childhood, the dysfunction was normal to them.

As you might imagine, all of this happening all at once caused me a massive amount of trauma, and ultimately, I ended up with a diagnosis of PTSD in 2022 when my Aspergers diagnosis was also officially changed to autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Unable to regulate myself after PTSD, I lost all of my social support and every person who ever mattered to me following the NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Services) investigated marital rape, ongoing financial abuse, forced homelessness, destruction of personal property and court sanctioned legal kidnapping of my children. I couldn't emotionally keep it together and lashed out at anyone who tried to get close and help me. It took me years of therapy and EMDR, DBT coaching, and the benefit of having PTSD-growth as a silver lining, but I did slowly begin to recover. It wasn't until my later diagnosis of ADHD earlier this year in 2025 that I finally gained a fuller picture of my specific neurology and understood the challenges I have been facing my whole life because of it. Because women and girls were traditionally not included in early ADHD diagnosis, we still are learning the ways that neurodivergence presents across gender spectrums and in my case, this lack of public and personal knowledge has resulted in extensive social trauma, stigma, sanctioned consequences, and repeated negative judgments regarding my behavior. But I also feel autism has given me many strengths as well. I have super-human abilities of pattern recognition, and combined with my intuition this has made me seem almost psychic at times. This experience is referred to in psychology as 'flow state'. My ability to hyperfocus came in handy when I went back to college in 2023 as part of my active and ongoing recovery process from the PTSD I was diagnosed with the previous year, and turning my trauma into my autistic special interest has subsequently resulted in this book you are currently reading.

After separating from my ex-husband and spending six months homeless living in my minivan and travelling through California, Oregon and Washington states while in the middle of my second round of cancer treatment, involved in a series of reconstructive surgeries, I then found an apartment fortunately just before the COVID virus hit and pandemic lockdowns began. I have now been living in the same town for the past five years while going back to school, gardening, volunteering and single parenting two of my boys who were ultimately removed by the state from

their father's home and placed in my care two years ago following at least a dozen reports of abuse and neglect.

Initially I planned to finish the degree I had started in Psychology when I was in my early 20's, but after enrolling at Lower Columbia College in 2022 and obtaining my Associates degree in Psychology in 2024 I began attending Washington State University and switched my major to Sociology with a minor in Anthropology. My personal goal I set in 2022 while initially enrolling back in school was to learn what abuse is and how to prevent it, so that I can avoid getting in another situation like my last marriage again, and learn what healthy is, so I can avoid replicating abusive dynamics in my home. At this time, I feel I can say I've accomplished this. I also believe I have some good ideas on how to prevent abuse, which I discuss in further detail later in the chapter on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).

The professional goal I set for myself several years ago was to find a way to use what I learned while in college to prevent the psychological abuse of children everywhere, so that other kids don't suffer like I did, or like my own children suffered while I was unaware of repeating generational patterns. After three years of studying all of the social sciences, I've put together this book as a collection of several short essays to share what I'm currently learning. Each of the essays were written to stand alone, so there may be a bit of overlap in subject matter, but each time the information is presented in a new and engaging way. This allows for the book to be read chronologically or for sections to be used individually for reference. The essays have been arranged in a way so the book flows from defining autism and the social issues surrounding the diagnosis to then providing possible solutions, all written from the perspective of someone with both learned experience and specialized education on the topic of social dynamics and relational trauma.

Deciding that if I was going to go thousands of dollars in debt in an uncertain job economy, I should study what will bring me the most personal benefit and enjoyment, the first class I took was Domestic Violence and Substance Abuse, which I learned is taught hand in hand because the two almost always go together. I then enrolled in a class in Communication because as an autistic, I needed help learning how to communicate better, and I learned some fascinating things that

intersected with the developmental psychology class I was taking. At the heart of it all was the ever present and demanding question “Why?” Why does abuse happen? What is autism? And how are the two related? One thing kept leading to another in my studies, and it was impossible not to see the connections as they arose. Some might accuse me of being motivated by biases while engaging in this research described here. I have approached my entire college education for the past 3 years and the content in my classes using inductive research with myself and my life as a personal study. I have done this with the best of intentions and the maxim “Know Thyself” kept in mind and close to heart. Inductive research is a bottom-up approach where researchers start with specific observations, look for patterns within that data, and then develop a general theory or conclusion to explain those patterns. Instead of starting with the biased assumption, I began with a question and a curious mind, and the essays in this book were the organic result. What I have discovered time and time again is that social inequality thrives in environments that are based in fear, so this book is an offering written with love, hope and in great faith. While some of these essays may deviate from the main topic at times, the common thread binding all of these ideas together regards the ways that humans treat each other in our society. I explore here in depth how autism as a cultural mechanism naturally exposes dysfunctional social norms.

Because I went back to school motivated to heal my trauma and study how to help others both heal and prevent their own traumas, I’ve also focused on decolonial work, indigenous studies, gender and disability during my time as a student at both LCC and WSU. I feel that the best way I can use my privilege as a white woman is to listen to and elevate the voices of marginalized activists and perspectives, and this work makes every attempt to create a solution to the social injustice sites experienced by autistics, neurodivergence and others through a functional framework created out of primarily works from our planet’s first peoples, Black and Indigenous Peoples of Color (an argument can and has been made by others that Black and Indigenous are one and the same, but that’s not my conversation or place to assert) along with research addressing the interest of other currently subjugated social groups, such as women and children. I do my best in this book to elevate other autistic and neurodivergent voices because it should never be about us, without

us. If the discussion is regarding autism, then our voices and experiences should be leading that conversation. The numerous reasons that neurodivergent and autistic issues are addressed here together with indigenous and social justice issues are discussed throughout the book, but a primary one relates to how the ethnicities currently being targeted for ethnic cleansing relate in a fundamental way. **Most groups targeted in ethnic cleansing share characteristics of Indigenous peoples**, even when they aren't formally recognized as such. "Indigenous" doesn't only mean *original inhabitants* of a land in the legal or UN sense. It also describes peoples who have a **deep ancestral relationship to the land**, culture, and community, live according to **distinct spiritual, linguistic, and relational worldviews** often rooted in ecology and kinship, and are **marginalized by settler, colonial, or dominant ethnic powers** seeking to control territory or resources. When seen this way, **most victims of ethnic cleansing fit the deeper meaning of "Indigenous"** because they represent relational societies threatened by hierarchical or expansionist systems. The Deeper Mechanism behind ethnic cleansing tends to occur when a **dominant or colonizing identity** wants to **homogenize** a territory politically, culturally, or racially, **exploit** its land, labor, or symbolic value without resistance, and **erase** the memory of relational worldviews that challenge extraction, hierarchy, or domination. This means **ethnic cleansing is often an assault on Indigenous consciousness itself**, and on the personhood and ways of being that remembers the land, can honor difference, and will resist assimilation due to their nervous system being wired for relational wisdom and a shared collective identity.

"Ethnic cleansing" is not limited to one group or era; it has occurred in many parts of the world, often during wars, colonization, or nationalist movements. Below is a summary of some of the major cases where specific ethnic or religious groups have been targeted: Jews during the Holocaust, Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Native American nations such as the Cherokee and Lakota in the United States, Bosniak Muslims and Croats in Bosnia, ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Tutsi civilians in Rwanda, Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, Uyghur and Tibetan peoples in China, non-Arab African groups such as the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa in Darfur, and Palestinian communities displaced from their ancestral lands. One of the first essays for school, which is included here, I wrote as a qualitative research project I did on local tribes. the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum. I directly contacted the Chinook Indian

Nation that they belong to for interviews as part of that project. Writing about and researching indigenous culture has been very healing for my heart and soul for many reasons. I enjoy the many parallels the indigenous relational worldview has to Buddhism, which I practice. I have Lenni Lenape ancestors, or so I've been told by family trees and immediate members, but the connection is ancestral and not directly cultural. Lenni Lenape means I have a deep respect for the culture whether or not this is true, and have a personal and foundational relationship with nature that is my own regardless. Going back to college pulled me straight through personal healing and into some deep ancestral work, which is reflected in these essays. In an attempt to avoid any romanticization or exoticizing of indigenous culture I studied anthropology through a decolonial critical framework for three years, during which time I worked with tribal elders who provided me guidance during my research of local tribes. My interest in indigenous cosmologies as a social scientist lies not in glorifying or returning to the past, but combining the relational wisdom we have lost with what we now know scientifically, to successfully move forward together and create a better future for us all. I am solutions oriented and will let the reader speculate as to what motivation there might be to eradicate an entire species of beings whose biology is collaborative and communal in nature, but as Dr. Karim Wafa mentions on their X account @DrKarimWafa, "Gaza has gas. Sudan has gold. Congo has cobalt. Haiti has limestone. Afghanistan has copper. West Papua has crude oil. Every nation suffering from some form of genocide or intense suffering is attractive in the eyes of the western imperial machine of consumer capitalism." Sudan, like Palestine, is currently experiencing level 5 extreme famine and its people are being exterminated. In 2024 over 130 Sudanese women committed suicide to escape weaponized violence and rape by genocidal militia.

Collective suffering is the elephant in the room that everyone avoids directly confronting. Carolyn Spring writes, "Our brains are geared towards avoiding trauma, and avoiding even the knowledge of it. We keep it out of mind with amnesia, with avoidance and with distraction. We focus on the symptoms rather than the trauma that caused those symptoms." Suffering is something that we try to distance ourselves from and in this way, we are failing the neurodiverse population, marginalized communities, victims of systemic violence and genocides.

Marty Teicher, MD, PhD has pointed out that “The parts of our brain that are involved in attachment have developed to diminish the drive in some way for attachment as a protective mechanism.” This book addresses the specific trauma responsible for the mechanism that causes parts of our brain to diminish for attachment (see chapter *Strange Situation*) which I theorize may ultimately account for the concept of wetiko.

Indigenous scholars like Jack D. Forbes have used the concept of *wetiko* to explain the mindset of European colonialists and the culture of Western expansionism. This perspective sees colonialism as a manifestation of a societal-level pathology characterized by destructive consumption and a lack of empathy for others and for nature. Eugenics, the obliteration and institutionalization of diversity in the hopes of achieving ethnic purity, begins like this but the practice of eugenics ignores the evolutionary and biological fact that it is our differences that make us stronger as a species. Defined by struggles with Western colonial social skills, autism can be used as a cultural mirror to reflect on the intersection where social skills and norms meet authoritarian hierarchies and power over dynamics using Autistic Standpoint Theory, which I have developed here.

Social science is the use of scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes. As taught by Dr. Kathryn DuBois at Washington State University, a theory is a logically interrelated set of propositions about empirical reality. For example, Conflict Theory, primarily associated with Karl Marx, is a social theory that involves a logically interrelated set of propositions about empirical reality. It posits that society is in a perpetual state of conflict due to competition for limited resources. These propositions include:

- Society is characterized by inequality: Resources (wealth, power, prestige) are unevenly distributed among different groups.
- Groups struggle for resources: Dominant groups maintain their advantage, while subordinate groups resist and challenge the status quo.
- Conflict is inherent and fundamental: Rather than a breakdown, conflict is a driving force of social change.

- Ideology legitimizes power: Dominant groups use their control over institutions (e.g., media, education, religion) to spread ideas that justify their position and maintain social order.
- Revolution is possible: Extreme imbalances of power can lead to social upheaval and the overthrow of existing systems.

These propositions are interconnected; for instance, the existence of inequality (proposition 1) fuels the struggle for resources (proposition 2), which is inherent to society (proposition 3) and maintained by legitimizing ideologies (proposition 4). This interconnectedness forms a coherent framework for understanding various social phenomena, from class struggles to social movements, by looking at power dynamics and competition.

Autism in America uses a combination of descriptive, exploratory and evaluative research methods and multiple approaches through surveys, qualitative research, quantitative and historical data generated and compared across multiple fields of social sciences to provide a framework that's a set of propositions about a hypothetical or theorized reality; something that may not be empirically observed yet, or that describes possible or counterfactual conditions. This book dares to ask what our social norms, relational and emotional skills, leadership and governance would look like if we prioritized and led with nervous system health. At its foundation, *Autism in America* seeks to answer what a trauma informed social theory would look like, and provides possible pathways to get there. It doesn't seek to restore tradition, but rather provides a path to uniting the worlds of science and spirit by mapping our body's relational intelligence to use as the basis for social theory, then uses that perspective to critique traditional social theorists, history and our current colonial culture.

Karl Marx inverted his predecessor Hegel's ideas of world spirit, and in so doing his theories remained bound by the dualism that sustains egoism. My motive in writing this book is to provide a both/and synthesis of science and spirit, integrating indigenous relational wisdom, Hegel's world spirit, and modern science (Ainsworth, Bowlby, Porges, Maté) to reframe Marx's critique of capital. Assata Shakur called for "*Weapons of mass construction, weapons of mass love. It's not enough just to change the system. We need to change ourselves.*" The theorized

reality discussed in this book and my frameworks offer the tools to enact that love systemically, psychologically, and globally. My work and writing carry forward her vision, showing that the struggle for justice is also the struggle to remember who we are, not just isolated egos, but as a collective being capable of fierce love.

"Part of being a revolutionary is creating a vision that is more humane. That is more fun, too. That is more loving. It's really working to create something beautiful."

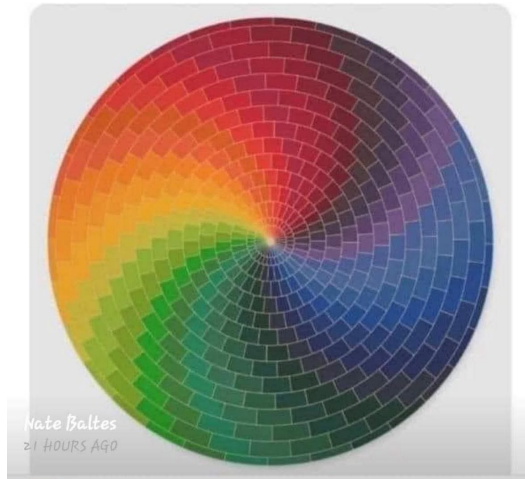
-Assata Shakur

Social theory is the study of how societies work, change, and influence human behavior. As an academic discipline, it provides numerous frameworks for understanding relationships between individuals, groups, institutions, and larger social systems. It asks important questions like why does inequality exist? What holds societies together? How do norms and values shape behavior? Are we shaped more by systems or by our own choices? How do race, class, gender, and beliefs shape our place in the world? And how does power and control influence our identity and our relationships? The major theoretical perspectives explored in social theory include: Functionalism, which views society as a system of interdependent working parts working together for stability (Durkheim); Conflict Theory, which views society as being shaped by power struggles and inequality (Marx); Symbolic Interactionism, which sees society as being built through everyday interactions and meanings (Mead, Goffman); Feminist Theory, which examines gender as a central organizing principle for society (Collins, Butler); Postmodernism, which challenges these earlier narratives and emphasizes fragmentation, language and identity (Foucault, Baudrillard). Put together, these theories become a toolkit we can use to understand why society is the way it is now, and how it could be different.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) and Lelia Ahmen (1992) discussed "colonial feminism," which is when women's rights get used as a rhetorical tool to justify domination abroad, while actual injustices at home are ignored. My essays here have made every attempt to avoid colonial activism when approaching the topics of autism and neurodiversity by using strengths-based assessments and addresses the everyday social

injustices experienced through colonial social norms. I have attempted to resolve the risk of rhetorics here by creating frameworks and theories grounded in both/and rather than either/or logic. This eliminates selective concern and the risk of mistaking surface gestures for structural justice because it challenges the very ecology of oppression, which is grounded in binary either/or logic and dualistic frameworks that create the matrix of domination.

once I was at the optometrist and he was measuring my ability to see colors and he said “the thing about biology is that nature doesn’t really do binaries, only spectrums” and I think about that a lot



Autism is a spectrum, and what that means is that every autistic person experiences different combinations of traits with varying intensities. Being a spectrum makes autism a dynamic disability, where symptoms

and severity fluctuate greatly day to day. While reducing the autistic experience to linear categories of functioning might be necessary to determine which individuals need what services, the language of division flattens the autistic experience overall, and this leaves a grey space between people who need services and those who are able to obtain them, often called The Gap, where a subset of the autistic population is unable to function at a level consistently enough to keep a job. The threat of falling in The Gap creates an endless loop of pushing oneself to perform and produce, to the point of burning out where one can barely hold their heads above water financially throughout the course of their lifetimes. For this reason, among many others, I do not support Robert F. Kennedy and others' plans to break apart the spectrum into higher and lower functioning labels, such as The New York Times article discusses, "Should the Autism Spectrum be Split Apart?" (Anselm, 2025). The Facebook page The Autistic SENCO, in response to an independent article in the UK called "Why autism may not be on a Spectrum at all," commented on October 8, 2025 that "I read The Independent's article, "Why autism may not be on a spectrum after all," and honestly... it's not exactly groundbreaking. Autistic people have been saying for quite some time that the "spectrum" metaphor is flawed — not because we aren't all different, but because it's too often used by neurotypical people as a linear scale from "a little bit autistic" to "very autistic." That isn't how it works. Autism isn't a sliding scale of severity — it's a complex, multi-dimensional mix of traits, strengths, needs, and experiences that interact with environments, expectations, and support. Yet here we are, once again, seeing an article that treats this idea as if it's just been discovered by "experts." And that's the problem, isn't it? Too many discussions about autism still centre non-autistic voices explaining us to the world, rather than autistic voices being heard, trusted, and platformed. The article points out that the "spectrum" metaphor can be misleading and that support needs change over time — both true, and important — but these are things autistic people have been saying, loudly and clearly, for years. It's frustrating to watch the same conversation circle round again and again while autistic people are still fighting to be the ones leading it."

Sher Griffin, Doctoral Researcher and Autistic Cognitive Ecologist has stated on her @threads account @sherlove971, "a universal trait of autism is asynchronous development, and the fact that it's been ignored

or flattened is causing a rift in our communities, especially between younger and late-discovered autistics...asynchrony means we develop unevenly. This doesn't mean broken, it means non-linear. It means we go on spiral paths and not staircases." I describe this non-linear recursive developmental process in essays like *Recursive Repair* and *Midlife Crisis Reframed as Recursive Healing*. Using both/and models and frameworks like the ones discussed in this book might offer solutions for these binaries such as either/or issues, and this book describes how doing so could reconcile so many different perspectives within multiple diverse life experiences into a single, nested, ecological and systems-based neurological model that effectively intersects social facts with biological facts.

RFK, Jr. has recently proposed links to circumcision and the common pain reliever Tylenol which have no basis in medical science or credible research and in the case of Tylenol, have been clearly refuted in large scale studies already. If the circumcision link is valid, then causality is more likely to be the emotional trauma's imprint to the still developing nervous system as opposed to Tylenol, which is explored here through comparative empirical datasets in the essay *Triangulated Cosmology of Colonial Trauma*. Rather than looking at material factors, I suggest evaluating the social environment this socially defined disorder occurs in, which *Autism In America* fearlessly attempts. And as this book clearly indicates, autism is less a disease than a culturally produced illness category that emerges at the intersection of genetic evolutionary neurological variations and an environment structured around societal intolerance for divergent behaviors, cognitions and relational styles.

Alexandra Chambers' (2025) *Autism, or Pathologised Evolution?* argues that autism is not a disorder but an evolutionary divergence rendered incompatible by industrialized environments. Drawing on genetics, epigenetics, neuroimmunology, and systems biology, she proposes a two-stage model: first, inherited genomic variations in redox, immune, metabolic, and neurological systems that evolved for adaptive responsiveness; second, modern environmental stressors such as toxins, inflammation, pharmaceutical and nutritional mismatches that cause epigenetic injury and mitochondrial collapse in susceptible individuals. Chambers distinguishes innate divergence from preventable harm, contending that diagnostic and medical systems conflate the two and thereby pathologize

ancestral diversity. She reframes phenotype as the dynamic interface between biology and environment and concludes that true accountability lies not in curing divergence but in reforming systemic conditions that transform adaptive variation into disability, which mirrors my evolutionary thesis here on autism as a cultural stabilizer and feedback mechanism within the collective nervous system. Both bodies of work dismantle the pathology model and reinterpret “disorder” as the biological and social expression of environmental incompatibility.

Like my theory, Chambers distinguishes between intrinsic divergence and systemic injury, arguing that industrial civilization produces biochemical, social, and emotional conditions hostile to ancestral neurotypes. Her “two-stage model” parallels my FCP structure: Stage 1 (inherited divergence) mirrors my framing of neurodivergence as a functional subsystem of human evolution, while Stage 2 (environmental stress and collapse) reflects my concept of trauma-induced system fragmentation. Both frameworks trace societal harm to structural coercion and environmental mismatch, she in molecular terms (oxidative stress, epigenetic suppression, toxic load) and this book in sociological ones (hierarchical control, linguistic violence, emotional suppression). Where my work extends hers is in mapping these biochemical dynamics onto collective social behavior, showing that the same dysregulation Chambers finds at the cellular level manifests as cultural and institutional avoidance. In essence, Chambers provides the molecular biology of the argument I’ve made here through systems sociology, that autism is not individual disease or disorder, but a diagnostic mirror revealing civilization’s incompatibility with its own evolutionary design and a hidden agenda for ongoing and active ethnic cleansing.

Autistic issues are naturally also social justice issues, because autism is defined by difficulties adhering to colonial social norms, which are based on a foundation of exclusion and punitive reactions. Autism and neurodiversity as a social movement illuminates the unhealthy relational norms Western individualistic society is based on, which is specifically why they are being scapegoated and targeted by fascist movements. This makes autism a political diagnosis. How we treat each other, especially the most vulnerable in society, is the single most important determining factor in humanity’s continued success and survival as a species. Eman Alasah states in *The Palestinian Feminist Movement and the Settler*

Colonial Ordeal (2024) that “patriarchy and colonial violence do not simply intersect but rather empower and perpetuate the sustainability of one another. This creates a dynamic of interdependence and reciprocity, according to which several oppressive structures become inseparable from and contingent on each other; a proposition that the intersectional theoretical framework fails to expound.” My social theories and frameworks attempt to address this failure of intersectional frameworks (which are based in colonial either/or logic systems) to expound (which requires both/and systems) by creating comprehensive, effective, and thorough emancipatory paradigms.

I must acknowledge as a white, queer, neurodivergent woman I am not immune to Eurocentric forms of imperialist feminism, which reinforce the system’s oppressive nature. In an attempt to address this bias, I have created frameworks built from multiple interdependent lenses, rather than relying on universalism to attempt the application of a one size fits all solution. Using decolonial theory, trauma informed practices and neurodivergent lived experience, I show how different facets of healing can be integrated throughout society by using relational and context specific responses to ruptures and injustices. This ensures my solutions to restorative health practices are grounded in collaborative processes rather than imposed through replicated, coercive top-down methods. I theorize that celebrating our differences will naturally arise as a result of adopting a planetary and global identity alongside the creation of dynamic and fluid systems that transform the matrix of domination rather than attempt to subvert or suppress it, by dismantling the domination constructively rather than destructively.

As a late diagnosed autistic woman, I have always been fascinated by human behavior and social norms, which I have spent my lifetime trying to understand from an outside looking in perspective. Viewing the world as a social scientist comes naturally and feels like an inherent aspect of my autism. Like many people drawn to the field, I initially pursued Psychology as my academic major in college in part to better understand myself and the world around me. After obtaining my Associate of Arts degree in Psychology, it had become evident to me that the current biomedical model used to explain mental disorders as brain diseases and which targets presumed biological abnormalities with pharmacological treatment is missing a key social and relational component. I

switched my major to Sociology when pursuing my Bachelor's degree to try to bridge this gap in my understanding of mental health and disorder.

I spent my first year as an undergraduate at Washington State University studying Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology to develop a trauma informed, relational theory of society that treats conflict as a necessary and potentially healing function of social evolution. I was able to bridge duality by combining Functionalism with Conflict Theory and seeing conflict not just as a breakdown but as a necessary part of how societies adapt and evolve. This blending of binaries resulted in my Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) which transcends them both. It draws from my own ancestral indigenous culture and diverse cultural wisdoms but it is building toward universally restorative systems. I am seeking to create social cohesion by addressing the ways we interact and handle conflict in our culture, moving towards a more egalitarian society that responds empathetically and focuses on repair and restoration through perspective shifts and mutual understanding, rather than relying on power over dynamics that cause relational rupture and trauma. This story is about turning the mirror inwards and alchemizing our pain into wisdom rather than suppressing it or avoiding it.

This book contains five categories of theory:

- Speculative (autism as evolutionary adaptation and cultural mirror),
- Conceptual frameworks (FCP, Autistic Standpoint Theory),
- Metatheory (MIT, FCP bridging functionalism/conflict),
- Hypothetical models (autism as a disorder of civilization; Pillow Method analogy), and
- Normative theories (decolonial, trauma-informed proposals for governance, psychiatry, and education).

Speculative Theory:

- Autism as an evolutionary legacy of Indigenous nervous systems – I speculate that autism traits represent an adaptation that resists colonial-capitalist systems, framing them as both ancient inheritance and critique of modernity. This is speculative

because it extends beyond currently provable empirical reality and imagines a broader evolutionary and social function of autism.

Conceptual Framework:

- Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) – Presented as a framework to understand conflict as a regenerative and healing process within society, not merely destructive or revolutionary. It organizes relational, emotional, and systemic propositions into a model that can be applied to analyze social dynamics.
- Autistic Standpoint Theory – Another conceptual framework that centers autistic perspectives as a unique epistemology for critiquing social norms and institutions.

Metatheory:

- Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) – Functions as a metatheory by proposing that personal and social dysfunctions mirror one another, and that healing requires reflective integration across individual and systemic levels. It isn't just a theory about autism or society, but a theory about how theories (and social systems) themselves interact and reflect back dysfunctions.
- Use of FCP as a bridge between Functionalism and Conflict Theory – This positioning of FCP as a synthesis of opposing theories makes it operate at a metatheoretical level.

Hypothetical Theory / Hypothetical Model:

- Autism as a “disorder of civilization” – I explicitly frame this as a “set of propositions about a hypothetical or theorized reality,” imagining how autism could be understood differently if society itself is seen as disordered.
- Double Empathy Problem solutions via FCP + MIT (Pillow Method analogy) – Suggests a possible model for resolving communication breakdowns between autistic and non-autistic people, hypothesized rather than empirically verified.

Normative Theory:

- Decolonial, trauma-informed proposals – Much of my work is normative in that it argues how systems ought to be restructured:
 - Institutions should move from coercion to restorative relational repair.
 - Psychiatry should be decolonized to restore relational humanity.
 - Language reclamation should serve as a tool for justice and collective healing.

These are prescriptive frameworks aiming at systemic transformation rather than only descriptive analysis.

This restructuring is urgently needed because current systems, rooted in colonial and capitalist paradigms, pathologize natural human responses to systemic trauma and perpetuate disconnection. The dominant biomedical model, for instance, often isolates mental health challenges to individual pathology, overlooking the profound impact of social, relational, and historical factors. This approach not only fails to address root causes but also reinforces oppressive power dynamics by labeling divergence as disorder.

An "and/both" synthesis is therefore essential. Indigenous relational wisdom offers frameworks for collective well-being, reciprocity, and a deep understanding of interconnectedness that have been systematically eroded by Western individualism. Modern science, particularly the insights from attachment theory (Ainsworth, Bowlby) and neurobiology (Porges, Maté), provides empirical evidence for the profound impact of relationships and nervous system health on human development and social functioning. Marx's critique of capital exposes the economic structures that generate inequality and exploitation, but when reintegrated with Hegel's concept of world spirit, it can transcend mere material analysis to envision a more holistic societal evolution. Assata Shakur's fierce insistence on both systemic and personal transformation reminds us that true change requires a shift in both external structures and internal consciousness.

My theoretical Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) acts as the critical bridge in this synthesis. By re-framing conflict not as destructive but

as a necessary signal for systemic re-regulation and healing, FCP integrates these diverse insights. It allows for a trauma-informed analysis of societal dynamics, moving beyond blame to foster restorative relational repair. This emergent synthesis is not about returning to a romanticized past, but about drawing on timeless wisdom and cutting-edge science to design future systems that prioritize nervous system health, relational integrity, and collective flourishing. It's about building the "weapons of mass love" that Shakur envisioned, providing concrete tools for systemic, psychological, and global transformation. The struggle for justice, in this light, becomes a profound act of remembering our collective capacity for fierce love and building a world that reflects it.

Social theory has helped me to understand some of the struggles that I have experienced as an autistic individual, particularly when exploring the binaries between autistic/allistic, normal/abnormal, child/adult, neurotypical/neurodivergent, able/disabled, high functioning vs. low functioning labels, independent/dependent, verbal/nonverbal, social/antisocial, authentic vs. masked self, empathetic/unempathetic, rational/emotional, fixed/flexible, literal/abstract, and the double empathy problem. These binaries, often socially constructed, can lead to exclusion, misunderstanding, and forced conformity. These social constructions are rooted in the biomedical model, which is based in Cartesian duality that separates the body from the mind. My studies in Psychology revealed mental health and behavioral disorders may have biological and genetic components but primarily evolve from relational ruptures and social trauma. This trauma goes unaddressed in a biomedical model that pathologizes individuals for reactions to their environment and their relationships. Essentially, disorders are socially constructed.

Top-down hierarchies are characterized by a centralized authority where power and decision-making flow from the top to the bottom. A clear example is a traditional monarchy or an authoritarian government, where a single ruler or a small elite holds ultimate power, and directives are issued downwards through a chain of command. In such systems, individuals at lower levels have limited autonomy, and societal structures are often rigid, with strict adherence to established rules and norms. This can also be seen in some corporate structures with a singular CEO and clear, delineated reporting lines. In contrast, a decentralized model of society distributes power and decision-making across various nodes,

without a single central authority. Imagine a network of interconnected communities, each with local self-governance, and decisions being made through consensus or direct participation. An example could be a federation of autonomous collectives, where individual groups manage their own affairs while collaborating on shared concerns through horizontal communication and negotiation. Historically, many indigenous societies operated on decentralized models, emphasizing communal decision-making, kinship ties, and fluid leadership based on specific tasks or needs, rather than fixed positions of power.

Early anthropology, often intertwined with colonial endeavors, frequently encountered these decentralized governance and social systems. For instance, in parts of India, prior to and during British colonization, numerous communities operated with highly decentralized social structures, often organized around village councils (panchayats), kinship groups, or religious institutions with local autonomy. British colonial forces, accustomed to and seeking to impose top-down, centralized rule, struggled to comprehend and control these fluid systems. This clash highlighted the concept of cultural relativism and the idea that different cultures have different moral and social norms which the colonizers categorized hierarchically as more or less moral using themselves as a baseline, thus establishing the Western "myth of normal." They grappled with societies whose organization defied their hierarchical assumptions, leading them to often misinterpret or dismiss these decentralized structures as "primitive" or "disordered" rather than recognizing them as alternative, functional models of social organization. This encounter underscored how Western biases favored hierarchical models, often overlooking the inherent strength and adaptability of decentralized systems.

Deleuze and Guattari, in works like *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, challenge the rigid, hierarchical structures of Western thought by proposing fluid, decentralized models of subjectivity and society. Their concepts of the rhizome, deterritorialization, and assemblages break away from linear, top-down paradigms, instead emphasizing multiplicity, becoming, and the dynamic interplay of forces. These ideas resonate deeply with the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), which similarly rejects static models of order and instead views conflict as a vital, self-regulating force within complex social systems. Where Deleuze and Guattari map desire and power as decentralized flows, FCP sees

emotional and relational conflict not as dysfunction, but as signals of systemic imbalance and potential pathways toward transformation. Both frameworks prioritize fluidity over fixity, relation over domination, and healing over control, suggesting that sustainable social structures must evolve through integration rather than suppression of difference and disruption.

Instead of seeing conflict as purely destructive (as Functionalism often did) or purely revolutionary (as Conflict Theory did) my Functional Conflict Perspective sees it as a self-regulating process that can drive growth, healing, and positive reform when it is handled relationally. The core idea behind Functional Conflict Perspective is conflict is both inevitable and necessary, not something to be avoided, as it reveals dysfunctions and catalyzes change. In order for it to be productive, conflict must be integrated, not suppressed, which transforms it from a function of coercive domination to restorative relational repair. When ruptures are treated as signals, misalignments can be addressed and cohesion can be obtained. By transcending these binaries, power can be restructured through cooperation. Our individual relationships are reflective of the institutions and social systems that support them. Conflict is not the opposite of order, it's how we regulate ourselves, confront injustice, and evolve into more secure and emotionally healthy systems. Without this perspective, any relationship or revolution will recreate oppression in new forms. This understanding naturally extends to the concept of shared power. When those in positions of power, whether in governance, corporations, or even within families, engage in genuine power-sharing with the historically marginalized or currently less powerful, they initiate a process of profound transformation. For the powerful, this is not a loss, but a strategic investment in long-term stability and resilience. By decentralizing decision-making and valuing diverse perspectives, leaders can gain access to innovative solutions, reduce systemic blind spots, and foster a more committed and engaged populace. This shift from coercive control to cooperative governance reduces the constant drain of energy required to maintain power-over dynamics, freeing up resources and fostering genuine trust. Instead of facing cyclical challenges to their authority, powerful entities can become co-creators of sustainable systems, benefiting from the collective intelligence and intrinsic motivation of all members. Giving away power, in this light, is not an act of diminishment

but an act of expansion and an embrace of a more robust, adaptive, and ultimately more prosperous collective future where true security is found in shared well-being, not isolated control. The TED Talk with Nick Hanauer (Beware, Fellow Plutocrats, the Pitchforks are Coming) discussed an emergent need for his capitalist class to fix the “glaring economic inequalities in our society” (TED, 2014, 4:10), noting that inequality is terrible for business.

In 2004 the U.S. Government Publishing Office released 14 Congressional Findings as part of IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). The first sentence of the first finding reads that “Congress finds the following: Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society.” Autism in America: One Woman’s Search for Healing clearly identifies the mechanisms in Western culture that are socially disabling for autistic individuals, and through theories like the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), creates a resolution for the capitalist class and also establishes a pathway for disabled members of society to be integrated and included.

Functional Conflict Perspective is not an attempt to recreate traditional hierarchy, whether indigenous or Western. Instead, it offers a regenerative framework that recognizes the functional role of conflict, emotion, and trauma in shaping societies, and it emphasizes that healing and transformation must be central to governance and institutional design. It is not rooted in one traditional ideal but draws from multiple cultural epistemologies including indigenous, postmodern, feminist, and trauma informed frameworks while proposing a universal, adaptable structure grounded in relational well-being and restorative systems. In terms of epistemology, this perspective rests on the view that knowledge is relational and how we understand society depends on our social, emotional, and historical positioning, conflict reveals ruptures in those relational systems, and restorative responses to conflict are more culturally sustainable than coercive control or violence. It draws from indigenous ways of knowing, decolonial thought, Critical Theory, Functionalism and Systems Theory, and psychological trauma research, especially interpersonal neurobiology and Attachment Theory. FCP is a healing-based framework, a lens to see conflict as a source of regeneration, and a method to reimagine institutions as spaces for collective healing and not tools of control. This perspective is a direct result of my ongoing

development and use of Autistic Standpoint Theory while approaching social problems.

- 1) Patricia Hill Collins situated Black feminist thought in her development of standpoint epistemology, which contained six distinguishing features:
- 2) the contradiction between US ideals of individual freedom, equity and social justice and the reality of differential group treatment;
- 3) the tension between experiences and ideas, where similar challenges may be faced by a group but individuals may differ on the significance;
- 4) the connections between experiences as a collective and group knowledge which results in a dialogical relationship suggest changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions;
- 5) the existence of standpoint does not mean that members of the group appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize its potential as a catalyst for social change;
- 6) neither thought nor practice can remain static and knowledge within a social justice project must remain dynamic;
- 7) one group's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice.

While initially intended for the Black feminist movement specifically, all six of these distinguishing features can be applied to the autistic community and the autistic perspective, revealing a separate and equally valid Autistic Standpoint that is likewise grounded in a humanist vision. Both standpoints share a cultural and structural “othering” of a shared group identity. Autistic Standpoint Theory is characterized by two additional distinguishing features:

- 8) the dialectical tension between viewpoints of parents of autistic children, and of autistic individuals themselves;
 - 9) the presumption of universality in regards to how autism presents for the male sex and gender, and the subsequent erasure of the female, transgender and non-binary autistic experience.
- An argument could be made for a ninth and final facet of the shared autistic experience to be the difference between late diagnosis and early diagnosis when it comes to general prognosis

and life outcomes as well as life expectancy. However, it must be noted that this aspect of autism is entirely due to capitalism and colonial conditions, which create additional difficulties for autistics and their families.

Epistemological relativism is the view that knowledge and truth are relative to different perspectives. The primary criteria for an autism diagnosis is persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction, so an autistic Sociologist might at first seem a bit contradictory or ironic to some individuals. Autistic individuals often face challenges in areas such as:

- Understanding and using nonverbal cues: This includes difficulty interpreting facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, as well as using these cues effectively themselves.
- Engaging in reciprocal conversation: Autistic individuals may struggle with the back-and-forth nature of conversations, turn-taking, and understanding social reciprocity. They might also engage in monologues on preferred topics without gauging the listener's interest.
- Developing and maintaining relationships: Difficulties with social initiation, understanding social norms, and processing complex social dynamics can make it challenging to form and sustain friendships or other relationships.
- Sharing interests and emotions: While capable of deep emotions, autistic individuals may find it difficult to express them in ways that neurotypical individuals readily understand or to share interests in a socially conventional manner.

The apparent contradiction arises because sociology, as a discipline, fundamentally revolves around the study of social interactions, relationships, and the structures that govern human behavior within society. A core part of sociological inquiry involves observing, analyzing, and interpreting social communication and interactions. Therefore, an individual whose diagnosis is characterized by "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction" might seem to be at a disadvantage in a field that requires a deep understanding of these very phenomena. It raises the question of how one can effectively study and theorize about social dynamics if they themselves experience these social "deficits."

However, as Roy Richard Grinker pointed out in *On Being Autistic, and Social* (2010), anthropologists are challenging traditional psychological and medical models by recognizing the complex and valid ways that autistic people socially engage. Nancy Bagatell's study *From Cure to Community: Transforming Notions of Autism* (2010) was cited by Grinker, and she further illustrates how autistic adults are reshaping social perceptions of autism through self-advocacy and online communities. Autistic self-advocate, anthropologist and primatologist Dawn Prince-Hughes' work demonstrates social adaptability and challenges outdated assumptions about autistic isolation. The work of advocates like Temple Grandin, Morénike Giwa-Onaiwu, Ari Ne'eman, Greta Thunburg and numerous other successful individuals are living examples of autism's social versatility and highlight a growing need for the development of Autistic Standpoint Theory, which this book explores in detail.

Philosopher and psychologist Michel Foucault pointed out in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) that, "generally speaking, all of the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode: that of the binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.)" (Appelrouth and Edles, 2020, p. 664). In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault discussed how diagnostic labels and psychiatric treatments exist to define the identities of those considered afflicted, not to help or cure them. Foucault's analysis in *Madness and Civilization* (and elsewhere) posits that diagnostic labels and psychiatric treatments are less about objective healing and more about the exercise of power and social control. The act of "cataloguing the afflicted" served several key functions within a developing Western society but the fundamental driving need behind binary division (mad/sane, normal/abnormal, dangerous/harmless) was the foundational establishment and maintenance of social order through control.

As societies became more complex and institutions gained greater power, there was an increasing need to define and manage deviance.

- **Social Cohesion and Conformity:** By clearly defining what was "mad" or "abnormal," the "sane" and "normal" could be

reinforced. This created a sense of shared identity and promoted conformity to societal norms. Deviance, once identified, could be isolated, contained, or "treated" to prevent disruption to the social fabric.

- **Economic Rationalization:** In the age of nascent capitalism, the able-bodied and "sane" were valuable for labor. Those deemed "mad" or "abnormal" were removed from the workforce, and their care could be rationalized through institutions that also provided employment for others (e.g., asylum staff). The binary helped to categorize who could contribute and who was a burden, further solidifying economic structures.
- **Scientific Legitimacy and Professional Authority:** The act of diagnosing and cataloguing elevated the status of emerging psychiatric and medical professions. By claiming expertise in identifying and managing "madness," these professions gained social authority and justified their existence and methods. This professionalization reinforced the idea that there was a scientific basis for separating the "afflicted" from the "unafflicted."
- **Moral and Cultural Purity:** Especially in earlier periods, madness was often intertwined with moral failing or spiritual affliction. The binary division served to "purify" the social body by isolating those deemed morally or culturally undesirable. This helped to solidify dominant moral codes and discourage behaviors that deviated from them.

From Foucault's perspective, the recognition and containment of the "afflicted" were indeed intended to keep the "unafflicted" (the "normal" population) "safe," but this "safety" was achieved through a process of exclusion and homogenization, not necessarily through genuine care or understanding of the afflicted.

- **Physical Safety (Perceived and Real):** By institutionalizing the mad, society physically removed individuals perceived as dangerous, disruptive, or simply incomprehensible from public spaces. This created a sense of physical security for the "normal" population. While some individuals might have posed a genuine threat, Foucault argues that this was often exaggerated or generalized to justify broader confinement.

- **Social and Moral Boundary Setting:** The existence of asylums and the process of diagnosis served as a constant reminder of the boundaries of acceptable social behavior and thought. It signaled that there were consequences for deviance, thereby regulating the behavior of the "unafflicted" through fear and the desire to remain within the bounds of "normality."
- **Maintaining Normative Power:** The "unafflicted" were made "safe" by having their own "normality" constantly reaffirmed. The presence of the "other" (the mad) provided a mirror against which the "normal" could define themselves, solidifying their own identity and power. This process reduced the existential threat of unpredictable human behavior by categorizing and containing it.
- **Suppression of Alternative Realities:** By pathologizing certain ways of thinking or experiencing the world, society suppressed alternative forms of knowledge, expression, and social organization. This protected the dominant rationality and worldview from challenge, ensuring the stability of existing power structures.

In essence, Foucault argues that the elaborate systems of diagnostic labels and psychiatric treatments were deeply embedded in the societal desire for order, control, and the consolidation of power. The afflicted were catalogued not primarily for their own benefit, but to serve the interests of the dominant social order, which sought to define itself, maintain its cohesion, and manage its perceived threats through the systematic exclusion of those deemed outside the norm. This book develops and uses an Autistic Standpoint Theory through a series of interconnecting essays written on various topics across the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics rooted in my lived experience as a parent, a researcher, an autistic advocate, and a personal witness to the costs of societal fractalization and disconnection. Autistic Standpoint Theory puts a name and theoretical framework on what autistic advocates and the online neurodivergent community has been referring to as the Autistic Perspective for many years. It exists as a cultural mirror that explores and reflects the binary and often arbitrary distinction between neurotypical and neurodivergent, and it redefines autism through a non-dual and trauma informed lens as a strength based, not deficit-based way of

experiencing the world that we all live in. Sociologist Dorothy E. Smith initially developed standpoint theory in contrast to the mainstream field of sociology, which “reflected the relevance, interests, and perspectives of (white, middle class) males” (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 632). Standpoint epistemology, expanded by Patricia Hill Collins, asserts that knowledge is socially situated and that what one knows is affected by the position one has in society (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 467).

Sandra Harding argued that feminist standpoint theorists are privileged epistemologically by being members of an oppressed group, because it allows them a unique vantage point and perspective on social injustice and inequality (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 638). Institutional ethnography and standpoint epistemology share similarities with Foucault’s genealogy, where “subjugated knowledges “emancipated” through archeological investigation are “reactivated” and set in “opposition to the scientific hierarchicalisation of knowledges and effects intrinsic to their power” (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 652). Genealogies are anti-sciences that stage an insurrection against the coercive powers of formal scientific discourse and society’s centralized institutions, which render mute forms of knowledge considered arbitrary or outside the accepted body of knowledge. Autistic Standpoint Theory is a genealogy that I have developed in contrast to the mainstream neurotypical discourse present in the academic disciplines of psychology, anthropology and sociology and the essays contained in this book were written from that unique vantage point, allowing the reader an “outside looking in” mirrored perspective on neurotypical institutions and social norms.

Each essay in this book is a shard of cultural reflection, a fragment of understanding from different vantage points: child development, neurodiversity, psychiatry, linguistics, governance, colonial history and Indigenous wisdom. They are not in chronological order from date written but instead have been woven together by theme and tied together by common threads. Together, they attempt to reassemble a broken mirror to help us remember not only who we are, but who we were before the severance. What unifies these essays is a core belief: that human suffering is not random, personal, or inevitable. It is structured, cultural, and fully functional if we are willing to confront the ways that our social systems have been designed to disconnect us from ourselves, each other, and the Earth. The common thread weaving all of these ideas together and the

basis of all of my theories is the social wiring of the vagus nerve, contrasted with how neurodivergence and autism is pathologized for the ways that their nervous systems react to a colonialist society reliant on power dynamics. These social sanctions are used through isolation, shunning and stigmatization in order to control human behavior through imposed conformity to culturally constructed behavioral norms. Autism in America identifies what we're wired for biologically and uses that information with the discordant hypothesis and a basic understanding of the current mismatch between our evolved bodies and our bodies of governance to design a social theory based in somatic learning and relating.

“The vagus nerve is a primary carrier of information describing the state of the body to the brain, and transmitting information from the brain back to the body. It's a feedback mechanism which is responsible for maintaining homeostasis for many of our vital organs and brain/body functions. Research over the past few decades shows that the vagus plays a key role in managing our levels of stress as well as our body's inflammation; in this age of stress- and inflammation-related disease, it is perhaps the most important nerve in the body for us to be paying attention to.” (Polyvagal Institute, 2025) The vagus nerve is often called the social nerve in polyvagal theory because it is wired for social connection based on how it regulates safety, communication, and co-regulates with others. The ventral vagal branch (unique to mammals) supports social engagement. It connects to the face, eyes, ears, and voice box. This wiring means our physiology is literally designed to “broadcast” and “receive” cues of safety from others.

What Does the Vagus Nerve Do?

MOOD

As a key component of the parasympathetic nervous system, the vagus (cranial nerve X) modulates our body's stress response. It originates in the brainstem and influences the limbic system, which is responsible for regulating emotions and mood.

BREATHING

Although the vagus nerve plays an essential role in autonomic regulation of respiration, it does not directly control the diaphragm. The phrenic nerve is the primary motor supply to the diaphragm; however, the vagus nerve modulates respiratory patterns by coordinating the brainstem circuits which influence parasympathetic output to thoracic organs.

IMMUNE FUNCTIONS & THE INFLAMMATORY REFLEX

The vagus nerve plays a key role in modulating immune function through what is known as the inflammatory reflex—a neuroimmune feedback loop. This neuroimmune modulation contributes to systemic homeostasis, linking autonomic regulation to immune resilience and helping prevent excessive or chronic inflammatory responses.

FACIAL & VOICE EXPRESSIONS

Through its coordination with cranial nerve VII (facial nerve), the vagus supports expressive communication.

It directly modulates vocal tone via innervation of the laryngeal muscles and indirectly contributes to prosodic and affective signaling.

SPEECH

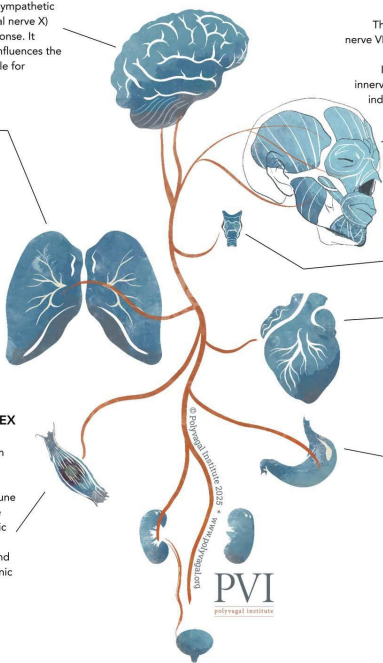
The vagus nerve contributes to speech by modulating vocal cord function and coordinating with respiratory rhythms, in concert with other cranial and cortical systems.

HEART RATE & BLOOD PRESSURE

The vagus nerve plays a key role in regulating heart rate by releasing specific neurotransmitters that slow down the heart rate, promoting a state of relaxation.

DIGESTION

The vagus nerve modulates the enteric nervous system (ENS), which independently governs much of our digestive function.

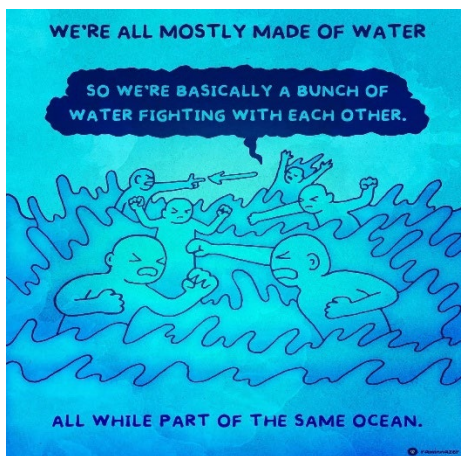


The dorsal vagal branch controls immobilization (shutdown, freeze), important for survival when escape isn't possible. The vagus nerve automatically scans the environment for safety or danger without conscious awareness. Human beings evolved in hunter gatherer societies for 90% of their time on Earth according to the discordant hypothesis which points out the current mismatch between our biology and modern society. Because the vagus nerve links the heart, lungs, face, and voice, our bodies regulate each other. The human nervous system is "wired for social" and designed for connection because the vagus nerve integrates the heart, breath, face, ears, and voice into a social engagement system that lets us co-regulate, feel safe, and bond with others. We evolved that way in hunter gatherer societies that paired relational language and cognition with collectivist cultures and a deep understanding of one's self as a multidimensional being, both an individual experiencing the world and the world experiencing itself as an individual. Colonization, then, is not just about land but is primarily about the reduction of consciousness and trauma to the nervous system that occurs when an identity has been fractured and entire social systems built upon the fragmentation of individuals severed from an awareness of themselves and the entirety of humanity as a single collective body. "The term "collective unconscious," or general unconscious, is used in recognition of the fact that there is a common humanity built into our nervous system out of which our imagination works" stated Joseph Campbell.

Janae Elizabeth, known on social media as Trauma Geek, has said that "Though typically not mentioned in studies of the nervous system, the context of colonialism and power-over culture is essential to understanding the mechanics of the modern human nervous system. The social systems that we have built are collapsing and the lack of a social safety net is impacting more and more people. We are all traumatized to some extent. Global warming, a pandemic, all of the -isms are danger signals to the body, and it is very human to have overwhelming stress responses to these things. To ignore these aspects of our reality in the conversation about the nervous system would be a dire mistake." Janae Elizabeth accurately identifies the symptoms here, but not the underlying cause of capitalism and Western colonialism severing the self away from its common humanity that Campbell referred to, making my Autistic Standpoint Theory urgent and timely at this point in history. Every institution that

once promised order (education, medicine, governance, family) now reveals fractures beneath its surface. Mental health crises are framed as individual malfunctions, neurodivergence is pathologized, while entire populations are displaced, silenced, or surveilled in the name of progress. Beneath these symptoms lies something deeper, a collective trauma, fragmented and encoded into the very systems meant to protect us. This trauma, of a collective relational species being forced into individual mental prisons made from an egoic clinging to identification with the “I” as self, happened before we were born, but is now stored in our bodies as generational trauma and manifests in the world as inequity, unmitigated conflict, social injustice, dominance, power struggles and war.

A quote often attributed to Antonio Gramsci is “the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters,” but this appears to be a paraphrase and misquote. The actual words that he wrote in Prison Notebooks were “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 1971). Our current moment in history is an interregnum, referring to a period of time where there is a temporary pause between two eras. The morbid symptoms manifest themselves as emotional avoidance, social dysfunction, inequality, instability, exploitation, and rising state violence, which all are occurring in response to the growing recognition of human rights, calls for restructuring, and a collective desire to give birth to something new.



Conflict, the self-regulating mechanism where old systems try to repress change, prevents our smooth evolution and transition, so crisis and chaos are propelling us towards transition where collective transformation has become unavoidable. Using Functional Conflict Theory along with Mirror Integration Theory will allow us to transcend colonial cognitive dualism which causes relational ruptures and cultural fractures, and can teach us a way to repair both society and ourselves. FCT and MIT are used together to create a variation of the Pillow Method, which instructs Japanese schoolchildren in how to take other perspectives and teaches them empathy. These two methods used together can potentially solve the double empathy problem.

The double empathy problem is a theory suggesting that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic individuals are a two-way street, arising from differences in how they perceive and interact with the world, rather than a deficit in one group's ability to empathize. It challenges the traditional view that autism is characterized by a lack of empathy and proposes that both autistic and non-autistic individuals may struggle to understand each other's perspectives and communication styles. This book offers several new ways of understanding and approaching the conflicts that arise from separating and labeling humanity into binary groups that contain within them established power dynamics such as neurodivergent and neurotypical, adult and child, autistic and non-autistic persons.

Foucault said in *Discipline and Punish* that “one day we should show how intra-familial relations, essentially in the parents-children cell, have become “disciplined,” absorbing since the classical age external schemata, first educational and military, then medical, psychiatric, psychological, which have made the family the privileged locus of emergence for the disciplinary question of the normal and abnormal)” (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 670). I have done exactly that in *Western Parenting Impacts on Human Development and Behavior* as well as the essays *Childism* and *The Western Crisis of Meaning and The Deficit Delusion*. By giving voice to the cultural codes, epistemes and linguistics underlying Western sociality and questioning their effectiveness, *Autistic Standpoint Theory* creates the opportunity for humanity to manipulate these forms of cultural transmission to maximize humanity's self-interest as a social body. What I offer here is a living system of thought and an invitation to

reimagine the world by making visible what has been silenced, by re-indigenizing our ways of knowing, relating, and governing.

The writings of Foucault are particularly relevant to autistics because the threat of being labeled “inappropriate” makes neurodivergent people mask or perform neurotypical behavior. Through this lens we can redefine neurotypicality as an invention meant to keep citizens behaving in a way that benefits the economy of punishment. Like Foucault's inmates, we discipline ourselves just in case someone's watching. I agree with Foucault that modern society is a Panopticon, because the Panopticon is the internalization of a surveillance society where inmates become their own overseers. In place of a police state where external forces are exerted to regulate individual behavior with the goal of producing correctly trained individuals who are then able to be exploited by the social order once they are deemed useful, threatening the populace with the possibility of continual surveillance creates an environment where people imprison themselves within their own fears. An awareness of behavior being monitored acts as a coercive regulatory tool (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 662) where “procedures of individualization” are used to exclude non-conformists (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 664). For example, an autistic individual, aware of the societal expectation to maintain eye contact during conversations, might consciously force themselves to make eye contact even when it feels uncomfortable or overwhelming. This “masking” behavior is not natural for them, but they've learned through past experiences (e.g., being told they're “rude” or “disinterested”) that a lack of eye contact can lead to negative social judgments and being labeled “inappropriate.” The internalized fear of being perceived as socially deficient, much like an inmate in a Panopticon who disciplines themselves under the assumption of constant surveillance, leads them to perform neurotypical behavior even when no one is explicitly monitoring them. This self-regulation benefits the “economy of punishment” by maintaining social conformity and preventing the individual from facing social exclusion or other negative consequences, thus reinforcing the idea that neurotypicality is the “normal” and desired way to behave. Prisoners become the guards of other prisoners as well as themselves, and this strategic individualization results in a “power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 665).

Systems like psychiatric institutions create identities that people then internalize and that diagnosis then becomes a form of coercive control where individuals begin to manage themselves according to the expectations attached to that label. Families themselves become micro-Panopticons, utilizing the punitive disciplinary processes normalized by institutions such as education and psychiatry to regulate their children into socially accepted forms of normalcy. Strategic individualization in the workplace results in employees complying with often unspoken expectations which results in persons becoming their own regulators for fear of violating implied and often contradictory rules and norms. Language functions like the central tower in Foucault's Panopticon and is a tool for constant behavioral monitoring and correction because it is embedded in everyday life and makes people alter themselves to avoid exclusion or punishment. For instance, the prevalent use of gendered pronouns and binary classifications in language (he/she, male/female) actively reinforces societal norms around gender. Before widespread acceptance of non-binary identities and the adoption of gender-neutral pronouns, language itself served to subtly, yet powerfully, exclude and invalidate individuals who did not conform to these binary expectations. The very structure of sentences often presupposed a gendered subject, implicitly coercing individuals into aligning with one of two established categories. This linguistic rigidity, in turn, shaped social perceptions, legal frameworks, and even personal self-understanding, making deviation from these norms not just socially difficult but almost linguistically impossible to express without challenge or explanation. The language, therefore, acted as a constant, internalized monitor, subtly pushing individuals to conform to established gender roles to be understood and accepted within the social fabric. As French structuralism noted, linguistic structures are a rigid formula for virtually every aspect of social life that structures our understandings (Appelrouth & Edles, p. 648), and can create docile individuals by fragmenting our entire sociocultural world. This book proposes indigenous language reclamation and rather than surveillance creating compliance, I propose FCP and MIT as a form of relational accountability and autonomy, which would bring the dismantling of the tower and a re-rooting in communal interdependence. Bruno et al. (2025) stated in their research, "First Nations teachings inherently value Autistic people and recognize their gifts, so rather than autism being seen as a 'disorder' that is to be 'cured' or 'fixed', through our worldview there is

an opportunity to fundamentally shift these spaces and for research to be more inclusive and accepting.” This book is a collection of ideas and an offering in that spirit.

My writings align with research by Bruno et al. (2025) which outlines

Five Principles for Autism Research with, by, and for Indigenous Peoples:

1. Labelling and Diagnosis - Be cautious of diagnostic labels rooted in deficit models; priorities culturally safe, holistic understandings of identity.
2. Indigenous-led and Culturally Rooted - Ensure research is guided by Indigenous leadership, language, and worldviews.
3. Relationality - Priorities’ relationships over results. Honor reciprocity, community connection, and ongoing care.
4. Challenge Anti-Indigenous Ableism - Address the colonial roots of ableism and center strengths-based, non-pathologizing perspectives.
5. Ownership and Capacity - Support Indigenous ownership of research processes and outcomes. Build capacity through collaboration, mentorship, and self-determination.

Autistic and allistic relationships are a two-way street, but frequently the pressure to understand the other and to change is being placed solely on autistic individuals. Applied Anthropologist and autistic scholar Christopher Cosby uses the term “weaponized autism” to refer to intentionally flipping the script on allistic individuals who are accustomed to using their power dynamics to force behavioral conformity on autistic individuals. In certain social situations, unsettling people on purpose can result in reaching a common ground. This book is both a weapon and an antidote, because while it identifies the problem by flipping the script on established and oppressive power dynamics, it also offers a solution for bridge building from both sides of the social chasm that we all find ourselves currently on the precipice of.

Autism as a Linguistically Created Disorder:

Global Autism Data Reflects the
Colonial Speech of Diagnosis and
Pathology



wapshkankwet
@wapshkankwet

If you're in the United States don't
ever, ever forget that English is a
foreign language.

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Abstract

Recent genomic research suggests that autism-related genes played a central role in the evolution of human intelligence. Building on findings by Starr and Fraser (2025), which identify accelerated human neuron types linked to autistic traits, this essay coherently bridges evolutionary genetics, linguistics, and social environment into a single explanatory model of neurodiversity, and argues that autism is not a disorder but a foundational evolutionary specialization and a neurobiological architecture that enabled advanced cognition, language, and relational awareness. However, the same genetic traits that once enhanced adaptability now interact with modern linguistic and social environments in ways that dysregulate their expression. Integrating insights from linguistics, neuroscience, and anthropology, this paper proposes a model of linguistic activation, suggesting that the structure and pragmatics of the English

language create social and sensory conditions that “turn on” or amplify autistic gene expression. Within this framework, autism is reframed as an environmentally modulated neurotype whose visibility increases under industrial, English-dominant conditions that overstimulate the nervous system and undermine relational safety. The argument situates autism at the intersection of biology and culture, revealing it as both the source of human intelligence and a mirror of societal imbalance. Rather than a pathology, autism represents a living record of human evolution’s most creative capacities, illuminating how language and environment together shape the expression of mind. This essay reframes autism as the mirror through which humanity can see how language and culture either sustain or sabotage evolution itself.

Connecting Evolution to Environment

A groundbreaking study led by Stanford neuroscientist Alexander Starr has revealed that autism may lie at the very root of what makes humans intelligent. The researchers found that the same genes responsible for higher reasoning, language, and creativity also increase the likelihood of autistic traits (Starr & Fraser, 2025). These findings suggest that autism is not a defect but a crucial part of our species’ evolution, and the very genetic trade-off that gave rise to human cognition itself (Koumoundouros, 2025). In other words, humans would not exist in our current form without autism. What we call a “disorder” may, in fact, be the evolutionary mechanism that made complex thought and language possible, an adaptive variation that became pathologized only within modern industrial cultures.

If Starr and Fraser’s (2025) findings are correct and autism emerged as an adaptive neurological specialization fueling language and higher reasoning, then the modern environment has become the very force that over activates these same genes. The genetic foundation that once enhanced our ancestors’ relational and cognitive intelligence now interacts with an industrialized, hypervocal culture that overstimulates the nervous system. Within the English-speaking world, where communication prioritizes self, competition and hyper individualism, these adaptive traits become dysregulated expressions of sensitivity rather than balanced capacities for pattern recognition and empathy (Snow, 2025). This supports the broader hypothesis that autism is not caused by language,

but shaped and amplified by it: English, through its emphasis on the individual “I,” rigid syntax, and analytic abstraction, creates social and sensory conditions that “turn on” the neurobiological circuits originally evolved for deep perception and social attunement. In this sense, the same genetic architecture that once enabled human intelligence now signals environmental distress in cultures that have lost relational coherence.

A post made on Facebook social media site by user Desert 64 in the group Autism Comedy on October 6, 2025 titled “RFK was wrong: English causes autism” included the below image, a cropped post from Dave Asprey remarking that autism may not be genetic. The post by Asprey shows the image of a map with North America disproportionately colored dark red as a presumed indication of autism prevalence:



Further inspection on Dave Asprey’s X (formerly Twitter) account found the original post, where Dave Asprey advocates for autism as an environmental disorder and challenges assumptions about the neurodiversity framework being purely genetic:



Dave Asprey 
@daveasprey

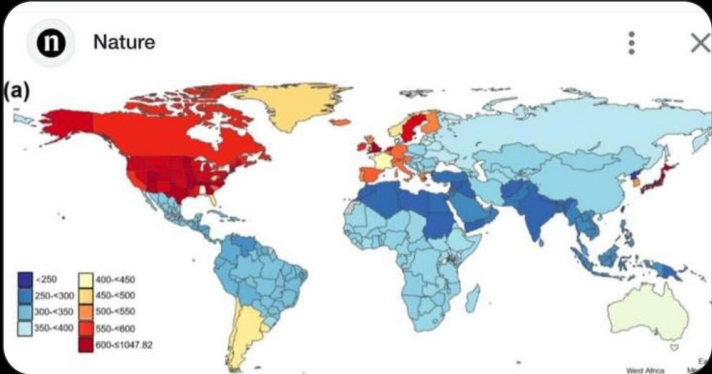
Follow  

Autism rates globally.

Still think it's genetic?

Genetics can influence autism risk, but it's what we do in our environment that pulls the trigger.

And it's not just one thing. 🙏



(a) Nature

Legend:

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250-300	450-500
300-350	500-550
350-400	550-600
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6:56 AM · Sep 23, 2025 · **231K** Views

The source of the map Asprey shared with his post was not made clear either in his post or his comments, but a reverse Google image search showed that this data and supporting graphic belongs to a paper published in 2022 by Marco Solmi and colleagues, one of the most comprehensive analyses of autism prevalence to date.

Using data from the Global Burden of Disease Study, they mapped autism spectrum disorder (ASD) rates across 204 countries (Solmi et al., 2022). The resulting visualization was striking: deep-red zones in North America and Western Europe signaled rates exceeding 600 per 100,000 people, while much of Africa and Southeast Asia appeared cool blue, indicating fewer than 300 cases per 100,000. To most epidemiologists, this gradient illustrated uneven diagnostic infrastructure and cultural awareness. To me, as both an autistic scholar and theorist of language and social power, it illustrated something far more profound, a map showing the effects of linguistic colonization. “The true history of any oppressed people is impossible to find in history books,” Assata Shakur said, but this history can be seen visually on Solmi’s map, and the data used proves the effects of colonization on humanity’s collective nervous system.

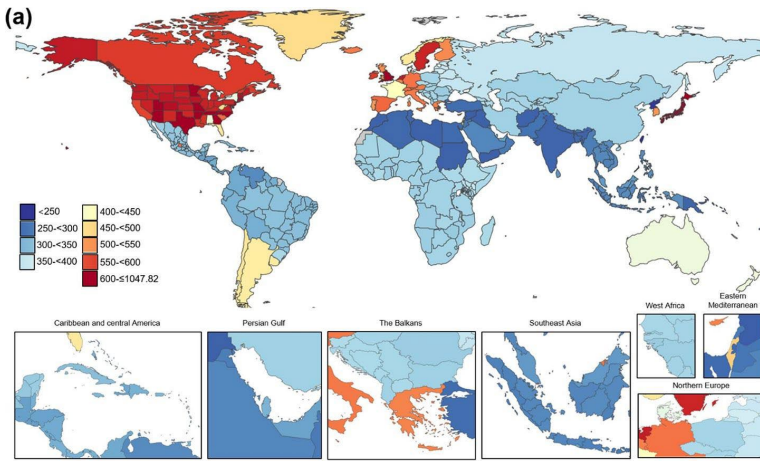
Desertuser 64 might have been joking, but they were right: the English language does in fact “cause” autism, a colonial disorder, and this fact is heavily discussed in my book with numerous references and credible sources. And Dave Asprey is correct, what we do in our environment is the biggest factor, but Western materialism generally neglects to account for what is invisible to the eye and is therefore ignoring the biggest environmental factor influencing our social lives according to Sapir-Whorf and Noam Chomsky, our language. *Autism In America: One Woman’s Search For Healing* uses my own biographical journey to trace the effects of language and social belonging on our mental, emotional and behavioral health. The book argues that autism is an evolutionarily adaptive neurotype whose expression becomes pathologized within the English-speaking, industrialized environment of America, a culture whose hyper-individualistic language, coercive social systems, and emotional disconnection disrupt the relational and ecological attunement that autistic cognition and neurology, as a naturally occurring genetic variant, was designed to sustain.

The Solmi map inadvertently reveals how speech itself constructs autism and confirms the underlying thesis in *Autism in America*: that language is not merely descriptive but is primarily generative, and shapes our neurological expression, social belonging, and even the boundaries of what we call disorder. Where English and its diagnostic descendants dominate public health, autism becomes visible, countable, and pathologized. What appears as under-diagnosis may in fact reflect epistemic resistance: societies whose communication and social norms remain relational rather than performative and collaborative rather than competitive.

When Marco Solmi and colleagues (2022) mapped global autism prevalence across 204 countries, they uncovered a striking linguistic and cultural pattern: the highest rates of diagnosis cluster almost exclusively in English-dominant, industrialized nations. This reflects how the English language's structural emphasis on individualism, self-reference, and categorical abstraction shapes cognition, communication norms, and, ultimately, diagnostic classification itself.

In linguistic anthropology, this is well-documented: languages that prioritize the individual "I," such as English, encourage egocentric speech patterns and cognitive framing, while relational languages (e.g., many Indigenous, Asian, and African tongues) embed identity within social and ecological context (Wierzbicka, 1997). When viewed through this lens, the Solmi data confirm that autism's apparent prevalence is linguistically mediated, its expression and recognition arise where social communication is filtered through rigid grammatical hierarchies and atomized subjectivity.

In short, the Solmi map functions as a global mirror of linguistic worldviews, revealing that the way we speak shapes the way we see minds. It demonstrates that autism, far from being a purely genetic anomaly, is a socially and linguistically constructed expression of evolutionary neurodiversity and is one that emerges in tension with environments that valorize separation over connection.



From Map to Mirror

Solmi’s global data present autism as an objective medical reality distributed unevenly across space. Yet maps, like languages, are never neutral; they encode the worldview of their makers. Epidemiological mapping presumes that autism exists as a discrete, universally measurable entity, that diagnostic terms translate cleanly across tongues, and that prevalence can be compared independent of cultural meaning. These assumptions rest upon the linguistic hegemony of Americanized English, the global language of psychiatry, biomedicine, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In *Autism in America: One Woman’s Search for Healing*, I argue that English is not merely a medium through which we describe mental states; it is a structural apparatus that shapes what can be seen, felt, and believed (Snow, 2025). Words such as functioning, deficit, and disorder do not arise from nature, they are cultural artifacts reflecting an industrial logic that values productivity, speed, and rational control. When Solmi’s map identifies the “highest prevalence” in the very regions that speak this language most fluently, it is not capturing an epidemic of neurology but an epidemic of interpretation.

The Linguistic Machinery of Diagnosis

Americanized English operates through grammatical binaries such as normal/abnormal, functional/dysfunctional, and rational/emotional that mirror the dualisms of Western thought itself. Psychiatry, written and practiced in that grammar, converts difference into deviation. The DSM-5's criteria for autism includes deficits in social communication, restricted interests, repetitive behaviors which are linguistic judgments as much as behavioral ones (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). They presume that healthy communication is direct, reciprocal, and verbally mediated, privileging Anglo-American norms of eye contact, turn-taking, and explicit speech.

When these norms are exported globally through diagnostic manuals, academic training, and international aid programs, they do more than mislabel difference, they impose a linguistic hierarchy that mirrors systems of power and domination. The very grammar of English encodes coercive relations: subjects act upon objects, verbs enforce agency, and pronouns center the autonomous self. This structure reproduces a "power-over" dynamic in speech itself, conditioning speakers to value assertion over attunement and control over reciprocity.

As these grammatical assumptions spread through psychiatry, education, and global health discourse, they redefine local forms of communication not as alternative but as defective. A child in Tokyo who communicates through gesture, or a community in rural India that values silence and collective harmony, may appear "less autistic" precisely because their linguistic ecology sustains mutual regulation rather than dominance. Conversely, a child in Los Angeles who fails to match the command-oriented pragmatics of American small talk is instantly flagged. Thus, the high prevalence of autism in the Global North is not evidence of genetic concentration but of a culture whose language itself enacts micro-hierarchies of domination, manufacturing pathology through its very syntax (Snow, 2025).

As Foucault (1972) argued, power operates through discourse and defines what can be said, who may speak, and whose forms of expression are rendered deviant. Likewise, Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital reveals how certain speech patterns are socially rewarded while

others are silenced, reinforcing class, cultural, and cognitive hierarchies. English, in this light, is not a neutral medium of communication but a disciplinary technology: a system that organizes thought, enforces hierarchy, and pathologizes relational modes of being that resist its grammar of control.

Speech as a Colonial Instrument

This is why the red zones on Solmi's map align almost perfectly with the historical reach of Anglo-European empire. The same languages that once justified conquest through the "civilizing mission" now universalize diagnostic categories through the "humanitarian mission" of mental health. In both cases, power speaks English. As I write again later on in this book, "Linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1997) has written about languages that do not privilege the individualistic 'I' of English, especially in Indigenous, Asian, and African contexts, and notes that English is one of the most egocentric languages globally" (Snow, 2025). This structural narcissism, embedded in syntax itself, teaches speakers to experience reality through domination and distinction: subject before verb, self before relation. The global exportation of such a language ensures that any deviation from its grammar such as collective identity, relational speech, or emotional nuance appears deficient.

These dynamic echoes Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf's principle of linguistic relativity, which holds that "the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group" (Whorf, 1956, p. 213). The spread of diagnostic English imposes a worldview where relational modes of knowing are rendered invisible. Likewise, Noam Chomsky's theory of universal grammar (Chomsky, 1965) reminds us that while humans share innate linguistic capacity, the specific structures we use channel thought in particular directions. The colonial export of English narrows that universal potential into a single grammatical ideology, one that prizes categorical clarity over contextual empathy.

Culture-Bound Syndromes and Linguistic Pathogenesis

Anthropological and medical literature has long demonstrated that language does not merely reflect illness, it produces it. The field of anthropology documents "culture-bound syndromes" such as koro in

Southeast Asia or *ataque de nervios* in Latin America, where socially shared idioms of distress organize bodily experience. The words, metaphors, and media scripts through which communities interpret anxiety or fear can precipitate real physiological symptoms, a phenomenon linked to *nocebo* effects and mass psychogenic illness (Hewlett, 2022). As Bonnie Hewlett explains, culture provides “categories and scripts that channel distress,” and while biology matters, there is strong evidence that clinical wording, media narratives, labels, and culturally shared explanations can amplify and pattern symptoms across populations (Hewlett, 2022, p. 94).

In this light, autism in the English-speaking world operates as a modern culture-bound syndrome: a diagnostic discourse that channels relational distress into neurological narrative. Just as *koro* localizes fear in the body, Western psychiatry localizes alienation in the brain. The Solmi map’s geographic gradient thus visualizes not only the reach of diagnostic systems but the spread of linguistic contagion, the way English medical speech scripts experience and gives shape to suffering.

The same mechanisms that generate psychogenic outbreaks through rumor and repetition now operate globally through social media, where clinical language circulates at algorithmic speed. The epidemiological “rise” of autism parallels the viral spread of explanatory scripts that invite people to interpret sensory overload, trauma, or social exhaustion through the idiom of disorder. In this sense, English-language psychiatry functions as both narrator and vector of mental illness.

The Double Empathy Problem as a Linguistic Collision

Autism research increasingly recognizes the double empathy problem: the mutual misunderstanding between autistic and non-autistic communicators (Milton, 2012). I extend this principle globally: the double empathy problem also exists between languages. Americanized English expects speech to perform transparency; many other languages encode emotion and respect through ambiguity, pacing, and silence. When global psychiatry, operating in English, encounters these divergent pragmatics, it misreads them as deficits. The issue is not that autistic people fail to communicate but that English fails to listen.

Solmi's data, viewed through this lens, becomes a map of linguistic friction. The "red" nations are those where the dominant language demands high-speed verbal reciprocity and individual expression, conditions that amplify autistic visibility. The "blue" nations are those where meaning circulates through context, kinship, or collective rhythm; there, the same traits blend seamlessly into the social fabric. What epidemiology interprets as absence may actually be attunement (Snow, 2025).

Industrialization, Speech Compression, and the Nervous System

Solmi et al. (2022) note that autism prevalence correlates with industrialization. But industrialization also reshapes language. The efficiency imperative of capitalist production migrates into speech: short sentences, clipped tones, rapid feedback loops, and algorithmic communication. The linguistic body mirrors the factory floor. In the book chapters here titled "The Colonization of Connection" and "Linguistic Exclusion and the Broken Social Contract," I describe how this compression of language compresses the nervous system itself (Snow, 2025). Autistic people whose sensory and emotional processing are often slower, deeper, or more integrative collide with this distorted, coercive and disconnected linguistic environment like biological canaries in an industrial coal mine. Essentially, their nervous systems are allergic to American English grammar and pragmatics and the social norms attached. Their struggle signals the human nervous system protesting the speed and superficiality of a civilization that extracts and exploits individuals. The epidemiological "rise" in autism thus parallels the rise of a speech economy that prizes output over resonance. Language becomes not only a reflection of industrialization but its neurological enforcement.

Translation and the Myth of Universality

Epidemiological English assumes its categories are translatable. Yet many languages lack equivalents for self, mind, or disorder. When the World Health Organization renders "autism" into Arabic, Hindi, or Yoruba, it imports metaphysical assumptions those cultures never held: that personhood is individual, that communication must be explicit, that difference is disease. The map's blue zones are, in part, zones of untranslatability: regions where local cosmologies and relationalities resist being folded into Western linguistic grids.

Rather than viewing these areas as data gaps, we might see them as linguistic refuges and places where collective conceptions of mind have not yet been privatized into brains and diagnoses. Their low prevalence may testify to resilience and a refusal to reduce relationship to pathology.

Toward a Linguistic Healing

If Solmi's study charts autism's statistical geography, my analysis charts its semantic geography. The former counts where autism is spoken of; the latter studies how speech itself defines what counts as autism. Together they reveal that the "global burden" of ASD is not simply neurological, it is linguistic. A world that speaks primarily in colonial English will continue to reproduce autistic distress because it enforces a grammar of disconnection: subject-object, self-other, mind-body.

To heal, we must decolonize language as well as medicine. This means expanding the world's lexicon of relationship and creating words as well as reclaiming Indigenous and relational languages. In such linguistic ecologies, autism might cease to be a "spectrum disorder" and reappear as a spectrum of human communication, part of the planet's biodiversity of consciousness.

Conclusion: Reading the Map Anew

@thewildlightwithin from threads on Instagram wrote "white people culture is founded on disenchantment, and vulnerability is coded as threatening. So, we're all jaded, scared, and distanced from real intimacy with ourselves and others. That turns into a personality, and then we pass it down to our kids." Viewed through this relational and linguistic lens, Solmi's map becomes less a chart of disease than a mirror of speech domination. The red zones do not show where autism is most prevalent; they show where the language of pathology is most entrenched. The blue zones are not immune, they are still being targeted by translation projects, policy imports, and humanitarian narratives such as Christian missionaries that export alienation through language and forced cultural assimilation.

If we reread the map as a map of language, we see a global nervous system caught between dialects of domination and dialects of relation. The question is no longer where autism is, but how we are speaking it

into being. When we change the way, we speak and when we loosen the grammar of control by learning a syntax of empathy, we may find that what we called a disorder was, all along, a different kind of fluency, one wired for relational attunement. As Dr. Mona Delahooke stated, “when we understand that self-regulation is built through attuned relationships, we also realize that positive behavior programs are now obsolete.”

Afterthought: Does the Way We Speak Really Change How Our Brains Work?

English, the main language in the U.S. and other Western countries, teaches people to think of themselves as “I” first instead of “we.” It’s a very individual-focused language that makes people talk and think in ways that separate them from others. Some other languages, like many spoken in Indigenous or African communities, focus more on relationships and community. The English language shapes how people think, feel, and relate because it emphasizes individuality, speed, control, and separation rather than connection. For people with autistic genetics, this kind of linguistic and social environment overstimulates the nervous system and suppresses relational safety, which can “activate” autistic traits that would otherwise remain balanced, turning an adaptive evolutionary neurotype into an expression of distress in a disconnected culture.

What “activated by the environment” means:

Think of your genes like a dimmer switch. The social environment, like how people talk, teach, and treat each other, can turn autistic traits up or down.

Big idea: Autism is an evolutionary, genetic part of humanity. Our social environment, including language, parenting practices, social norms, and school/work rules can activate how strongly it shows up. When we build kinder environments, autistic people (and everyone else) will have a better quality of life.

- What helps autistic people thrive:
- clear, kind communication
- consideration and understanding
- predictable routines and choices
- quieter, sensory-friendly spaces

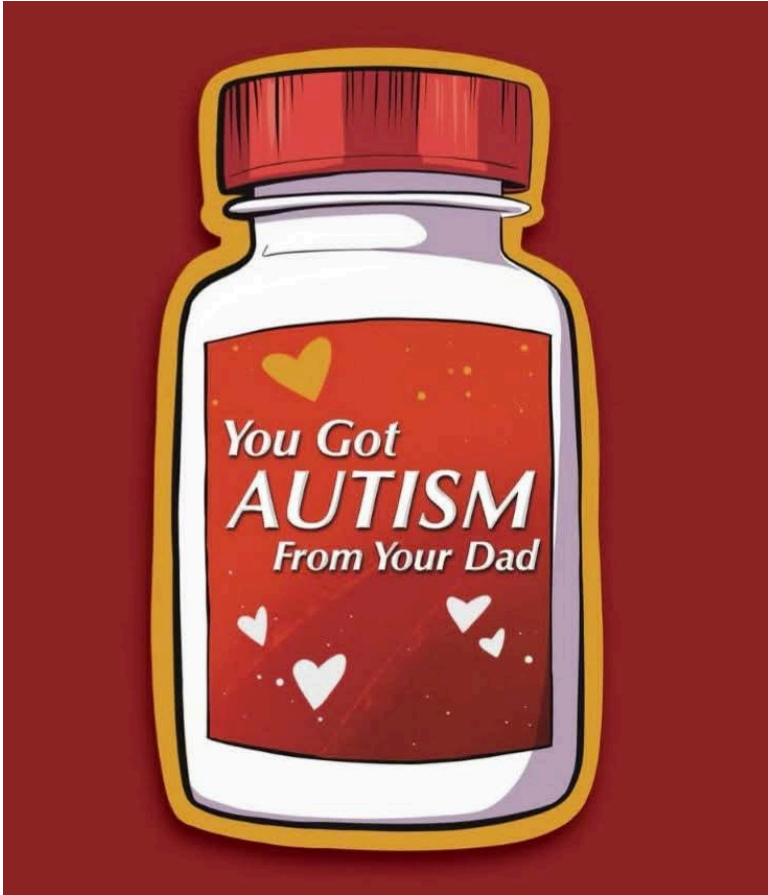
- time to think, not rushing
- genuine belonging and being included instead of pushed to conform, “act normal” (forced to make the other people around them feel comfortable at their own comfort’s expense) or being judged by others

Dean Spade’s engagement with Alan Freeman’s critique of the “perpetrator perspective” illuminates how legal frameworks tend to individualize harm, locating racism, sexism, or transphobia in isolated acts rather than in the systemic architecture of society. I fully agree with this analysis, yet I would extend it further: the reduction of structural violence to personal wrongdoing is not only a legal phenomenon but a linguistic one. It is embedded in the very grammar of American English, which trains speakers to think in terms of subjects and objects, agents and actions, and moral binaries of innocence and guilt. The “perpetrator perspective,” in this sense, is not merely a feature of jurisprudence but a property of language itself.

American English, shaped by colonial expansion, capitalism, and Protestant individualism, encodes a worldview that privileges the autonomous subject and erases relational interdependence. Our syntax demands an agent for every action. Someone must “do” racism. Someone must “commit” harm. This grammatical demand invisibly conditions our cognition, making it difficult to perceive how harm can be distributed, collective, or emergent from systems rather than individuals. Even when activists attempt to discuss “systemic oppression,” the language pulls us back toward personalization and toward the moral theater of victims and villains. While legal scholars such as Freeman and Spade diagnose the juridical limits of equality, the deeper prison may be linguistic because our thought patterns are confined by a language that naturalizes hierarchy and causal linearity.

If, as Sapir and Whorf proposed, language shapes the limits of perception, then liberation must also be a linguistic project. The discourse of rights, equality, and inclusion continues to operate within the same linguistic cage that produced the need for those rights in the first place. Social justice movements often remain trapped within the syntax of domination, attempting to describe new worlds with the vocabulary of the old. The unacknowledged frontier of decolonization is not only

institutional but grammatical. To dismantle systemic oppression, we must cultivate new linguistic structures and forms of expression that allow for relationality, circular causality, and mutual becoming. Until we do, the language of freedom will continue to echo the architecture of the cage.



Autism, Settler Colonialism, and the Evolutionary Legacy of our Indigenous Nervous System

Autism is both a socially constructed disorder of civilization and a neurological difference shaped by evolutionary ancestry

“A poet once said, 'The whole universe is in a glass of wine.' We will probably never know in what sense he meant it, for poets do not write to be understood. But it is true that if we look at a glass of wine closely enough, we see the entire universe. There are the things of physics: the twisting liquid which evaporates depending on the wind and weather, the reflection in the glass; and our imagination adds atoms. The glass is a distillation of the earth's rocks, and in its composition, we see the secrets of the universe's age, and the evolution of stars. What strange array of chemicals are in the wine? How did they come to be? There are the ferments, the enzymes, the substrates, and the products. There in wine is found the great generalization; all life is fermentation.”

-Richard P. Feynman

Introduction

Autism is most often framed in modern discourse as either a biomedical disorder or a neurological difference. Yet this framing ignores the deeper sociocultural and historical roots of autism as both a product of, and resistance to, colonial domination. The practices of settler colonialism, including conquest, rape, and the genetic intermingling of colonizers with indigenous peoples, must be understood alongside the nervous system sensitivities carried forward by these populations. This essay argues that autism is both a socially constructed disorder of civilization and a neurological difference shaped by evolutionary ancestry. By situating autism within the legacies of colonial violence, we can recognize

autistic neurology not as pathology but a remnant of indigenous sensitivity pathologized under capitalism and colonial rule.

Supporting Evidence and Background

Autism can be considered a “disorder of civilization,” a reflection of the mismatch between hunter-gatherer biology and capitalist social structures (Konner, 2001; Planet Babel). For 90% of human history, humans lived in cooperative bands where restorative justice, reciprocity, and relational safety structured life (Boehm, 2001; Carey, 2016). Modern punitive, hierarchical systems directly contradict this biological heritage, placing nervous systems into chronic survival states. Autism, with its heightened sensitivity to coercion and power-over dynamics, evidences this mismatch (How Autism and Decolonial Theory are Interrelated). Rather than viewing autistic behaviors as deficits, they must be interpreted as nervous system responses to systems of domination (see Conclusion)

Autism, long considered a biomedical disorder or an isolated neurological difference, must instead be understood as the intersection of evolutionary inheritance, colonial violence, and sociocultural pathologization. This paper advances the argument that autism is simultaneously a socially constructed “disorder of civilization” and an embodied neurological difference rooted in indigenous ancestry, relational sensitivity, and the traumatic legacies of settler colonialism. Autism, framed through this dual lens, is revealed not as a deficit but as a living reminder that capitalist-colonial societies are organized in opposition to human nervous system needs. The starting point for this argument is the discordant hypothesis (Konner, 2001), which recognizes the disjunction between hunter-gatherer biology and modern structures of civilization. For 90% of human history, humans lived in cooperative bands organized around reciprocity, restorative justice, and relational safety based on a collective multidimensional identity and a felt belonging to the greater ecology surrounding the individual (Boehm, 2001; Carey, 2016). Such societies-maintained cohesion through general reciprocity and emotional attunement rather than coercive dominance. Autism, with its heightened attunement to relational dynamics and its resistance to power-over relationships, reflects these deep evolutionary origins. When placed in hierarchical societies that prize compliance, competition, and punitive forms of justice, autistic traits appear dysfunctional not because they are

inherently impairing but because they clash with environments engineered against human nervous system needs (see Conclusion section of this book).

Here are some autistic traits, how they manifest in daily life, and why they might appear dysfunctional in hierarchical, compliance-driven societies:

- Heightened Sensory Sensitivity:
 - Manifestation: Overwhelm by bright lights, loud noises, strong smells, or certain textures. This can lead to avoiding specific environments, wearing noise-canceling headphones, or preferring certain clothing.
 - Dysfunction: In a society with open-plan offices, crowded public transport, or fluorescent lighting, these sensitivities can make daily activities exhausting or impossible, leading to reduced participation or perceived lack of productivity.
- Need for Predictability and Routine:
 - Manifestation: Strong preference for consistent schedules, clear expectations, and resistance to unexpected changes. A sudden change in plans can cause significant distress or anxiety.
 - Dysfunction: Modern workplaces often demand flexibility, adaptability to shifting priorities, and tolerance for last-minute changes. This can make it difficult for autistic individuals to thrive in roles that lack structured routines, leading to stress, burnout, or being seen as rigid.
- Direct and Literal Communication Style:
 - Manifestation: Speaking plainly, expecting others to do the same, and difficulty with social nuances, sarcasm, or indirect communication. May ask for clarification frequently.
 - Dysfunction: In social situations or professional settings where indirect communication, implied meanings, or "reading between the lines" are common, autistic individuals may be perceived as rude, blunt, socially awkward, or lacking understanding of social cues. This can lead to misunderstandings or exclusion.
- Deep Focus on Special Interests:

- **Manifestation:** Intense, sustained interest in specific topics, often leading to a vast depth of knowledge and a desire to share that information.
- **Dysfunction:** While this can be a strength, in environments that prioritize broad skills over deep specialization, or where social interaction is expected to revolve around general topics, an autistic person's focus on a special interest might be seen as obsessive, socially inappropriate, or indicative of a lack of interest in others.
- **Resistance to Arbitrary Authority or Power-Over Dynamics:**
- **Manifestation:** Questioning rules that seem illogical, pushing back against perceived unfairness, and difficulty complying with demands that lack clear rationale or feel coercive.
- **Dysfunction:** In hierarchical structures (e.g., traditional workplaces, schools) that value unquestioning obedience and deference to authority, this trait can be misinterpreted as insubordination, defiance, or an inability to work within a team, leading to disciplinary actions or career stagnation.
- **Challenges with Social Reciprocity (as defined by neurotypical norms):**
- **Manifestation:** Difficulty initiating or maintaining "neurotypical" back-and-forth conversations, understanding social expectations in group settings, or engaging in small talk. May prefer parallel play or activities.
- **Dysfunction:** In highly social work environments or social gatherings, this can lead to perceived isolation, being labeled as "antisocial," or struggling to build rapport with colleagues, impacting networking and career progression.
- **Differences in Emotional Expression and Regulation:**
- **Manifestation:** May experience emotions intensely, leading to meltdowns or shutdowns when overwhelmed. Can also struggle to express emotions in ways that neurotypical people readily understand, or may appear outwardly calm when internally distressed.
- **Dysfunction:** In cultures that expect subtle emotional displays and consistent composure, intense emotional reactions (meltdowns) can be viewed as immature or disruptive. A lack of outwardly visible emotion might be misinterpreted as a lack of

empathy or engagement, contributing to social isolation or misunderstanding.

“Imagine living so close to nature that the sky itself has a voice. When author Laurens van der Post lived among the Bushmen of the Kalahari, they once asked him: “Why can’t you hear the stars?” When he admitted he could not, they pitied him. To them, being cut off from the sounds of nature wasn’t just unusual—it was a sign of deep spiritual illness. Think about that. For most of human history, people treated rivers, winds, animals, and stars as companions, not objects. The world was alive, speaking, singing. Today? We often treat nature as silent—something separate, a resource to use. But what if the silence is not out there? What if the Earth is still speaking, and it’s us who have forgotten how to listen?” - *Weird Pictures and News*

How much have we lost in regards to our abilities as humans, and how much aren’t we even aware of that we’ve forgotten? And are autistics, with their genetic diversity, thus better attuned to a spiritual attunement with nature? This poignant quote from “Weird Pictures and News” creates these questions but also beautifully encapsulates a perspective that resonates deeply with the neurodiversity movement’s understanding of behavior as communication. The Bushmen’s ability to “hear the stars” and their pity for those who cannot reflect a worldview where the environment is alive, interconnected, and constantly communicating. Being unable to perceive these communications is seen not as a deficit in nature, but a “deep spiritual illness” in humans.

Similarly, the neurodiversity movement challenges the dominant neurotypical perspective that often perceives autistic or neurodivergent behaviors as inherently disordered or dysfunctional. Just as the Bushmen recognize a different form of listening to nature, neurodiversity posits that autistic individuals often communicate and interpret the world through different sensory and social channels. When an autistic person stims, avoids eye contact, or has a meltdown, these behaviors, which might be labeled “dysfunctional” or “inappropriate” by neurotypical society, are in fact vital forms of communication. They are signals from a nervous system that is experiencing overwhelm, seeking regulation, or expressing unmet needs, much like the “Earth is still speaking” even if some have “forgotten how to listen.”

The "silence" that the quote alludes to, and the idea that nature is separate and silent, mirrors Weitiko's severance from nature/Creator, as well as the neurotypical assumption that if communication doesn't fit a specific, narrow, socially-prescribed form, it isn't happening. The neurodiversity movement, however, argues that the "silence is not out there" in the neurodivergent individual; rather, it is neurotypical society that has often "forgotten how to listen" to the diverse ways neurodivergent individuals express themselves and interact with their environment. By reframing behavior as communication, the movement encourages a shift from pathologizing differences to understanding and accommodating varied forms of expression, recognizing that perceived "deficits" often stem from a mismatch between individual needs and societal expectations, rather than an inherent flaw in the individual.

Colonialism, as Dr. Nicole Hagen Hess (2025) defines, involves the domination of indigenous populations through settlement, exploitation, and socio-cultural imposition. Yet it must also be understood as a nervous system project (How Autism and Decolonial Theory are Interrelated section of this book). Colonial practices deliberately fractured relational systems and rewired bodies to tolerate control and compliance. This was achieved not only through displacement and extermination but also through the systematic rape of indigenous women, which ensured that indigenous sensitivity lived on in mixed populations while simultaneously being subordinated under colonial rule. Rabbit-Proof Fence (Noyce, 2002) portrays the deliberate severing of Aboriginal children from their families to "breed out" Indigenous traits. This was not only cultural genocide but also the weaponization of attachment rupture, severing children from mothers to manufacture the compliant, individualized ego required by colonial society. This practice echoes Mary Ainsworth's finding that American infants, unlike Ugandan ones, had already been conditioned to suppress protest in separation, which is a sign of cultural conditioning and infant training in emotional avoidance (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Emotions, meant to be coregulated relationally and experienced collectively, are now held in the body by the false egoic "I," which replays its trauma repetitively by creating similar circumstances to the traumatic incident until it can be healed. This pattern of unhealed trauma can be seen throughout colonial human history. Here lies the fall into ego through the invention of the "bonded I,"

engineered by colonization to replace collective identity with fragmented individuality. The intermingling of colonizer DNA with indigenous lineages created descendants who carried forward hypersensitive nervous systems and neurological traits once adaptive in relational, communal contexts but reframed as pathology in coercive, capitalist societies. Autism prevalence today cannot be disentangled from this history of conquest, forced genetic mixing, and intergenerational trauma.

The framing of autism as a disorder must therefore be understood as a colonial construct. As @Staya_Stray (2025) emphasizes, conditions like autism, ADHD, and ADD are only “disorders” under capitalism, where their traits are recoded as maladaptive because they conflict with hierarchical labor systems and normative standards of productivity. Trauma specialists reinforce this interpretation: Dr. Jen Wolkin (2024) describes PTSD and C-PTSD as “acquired neurodiversity,” demonstrating how trauma itself rewires nervous systems in enduring ways. This suggests that autism and trauma-related neurodivergence exist along a continuum of nervous system adaptations to unsafe environments. Similarly, Janae Elizabeth (2025) has argued that autistic nervous systems are often misread: prosocial fawning is mistaken for safety while authentic regulation is framed as dysfunction. This happens because neurotypical society often interprets compliance and agreeable behaviors as signs of well-being and successful social integration, even if these behaviors stem from a trauma response like fawning. For an autistic individual, fawning, an instinctual attempt to appease a perceived threat, might look like excessive politeness, people-pleasing, or masking their true feelings to avoid conflict or negative judgment. This performance of “normalcy” is then seen by neurotypical observers as the autistic person being “safe,” “cooperative,” or “well-adjusted.” Conversely, authentic self-regulation for an autistic person might involve stimming (self-stimulatory behaviors), withdrawing from overwhelming sensory input, or communicating in a direct, non-nuanced manner. These behaviors, while genuinely regulating and necessary for the autistic individual's well-being, are often misinterpreted by neurotypical observers as “dysfunctional,” “rude,” “anti-social,” or “disordered” because they deviate from neurotypical social norms. The dominant culture prioritizes external presentations of conformity over internal states of genuine safety and regulation, thereby

pathologizing natural autistic responses and rewarding trauma-based coping mechanisms.

Taken together, the perspectives from @Staya_Stray, Dr. Jen Wolkin and Janae Elizabeth reveal neurodivergence as a form of relational intelligence, one that accurately reads the coercive and unsafe nature of colonial environments but is pathologized precisely for this fidelity to relational truth. Jordan James (2025) describes it, “autism is a circular spectrum of difference and is different for every single individual” but the deviation from expected sociality is the shared common factor and indicates a natural aversion to coercive or manipulative environments which likely relate to autistic nervous systems evolving for collective multidimensional identities and coregulatory (shared emotional) attunement. From an evolutionary perspective, autism is not a new condition but an ancient adaptation. Genetic studies have shown links between autism traits and Neanderthal ancestry, particularly in domains such as pattern recognition, focused attention, and hypersensitivity (Pauly et al., 2024). These traits may have been advantageous in early human societies but are ill-fitted to modern capitalist environments characterized by overstimulation, social homogenization, and punitive control (Planet Babel). The hypothesis of Jordan James (2025) complements this view: disruptions in synaptic pruning may leave autistic individuals developmentally “stuck” at earlier stages, retaining infant or childlike pathways into adulthood. Synaptic pruning is a natural process in brain development where excess synapses (connections between neurons) are eliminated to increase the efficiency of neural communication. In typical development, this process refines brain circuits, making them more specialized. However, in autistic individuals, research suggests that atypical synaptic pruning may occur. This can mean either less pruning than usual, leading to an overabundance of synapses, or pruning that happens at different times or in different ways compared to neurotypical brains. The hypothesis is that these differences in synaptic pruning might contribute to some autistic traits. For instance, retaining more infant or childlike neural pathways into adulthood could result in heightened sensory sensitivities, intense focus on specific interests, or unique ways of processing information. Instead of being viewed as a deficit, this atypical pruning can be reframed as an evolutionary adaptation, potentially leading to a nervous system more attuned to detail, vigilant in its environment, and capable

of deep relational engagement, traits that might have been advantageous in different societal contexts. Author Megan Anna Neff is currently revisiting Erikson's stages of development through a neurodivergent lens on their SubStack, Neurodivergent Notes. Neuroscience confirms that atypical pruning is associated with autism, ADHD, and dyslexia (Fusco et al., 2021). Reframed not as impairment but as adaptation, this difference reflects a nervous system designed for vigilance, depth, and fidelity to relational attunement. Autism is therefore best understood not as disorder but as evolutionary resistance to colonial demands for compliance. This perspective posits that autism, rather than being a "hangover" or a vestigial trait from a bygone era, represents an active and persistent evolutionary strategy that offers distinct advantages, particularly in resisting and adapting to coercive societal structures.

Autism as a Proactive Evolutionary Strategy

1. Maintaining Neurodiversity for Collective Resilience:
 - The "Goldilocks Zone" of Cognition: Evolution often favors a diversity of cognitive styles within a population, ensuring that a group can adapt to a wide range of environmental challenges. Autistic neurology, with its deep focus, pattern recognition, and resistance to groupthink, can be seen as maintaining a critical part of this cognitive spectrum. This isn't accidental; it's a "deliberate" evolutionary hedging strategy, ensuring that some individuals possess traits that might be crucial for survival when dominant cognitive styles fail.
 - Avoiding Homogenization: In environments that demand rigid conformity (like colonial or capitalist systems), there's a pressure to homogenize thought and behavior. Autism's inherent resistance to compliance, masking, and superficial social engagement can be interpreted as a biological mechanism to prevent complete intellectual and social homogenization, thus preserving alternative ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. This resistance is not a malfunction but a built-in "fail-safe" against total systemic absorption.
2. Adaptive Intelligence for Complex Systems:
 - Truth-Telling and Systemic Critique: Autistic individuals often perceive inconsistencies, illogical rules, and

exploitative dynamics with heightened clarity, precisely because their nervous systems are not as easily swayed by social conditioning or emotional manipulation. This "fidelity to relational truth" can be seen as an evolutionary advantage that allows for an unvarnished critique of dysfunctional systems. In this light, autism proactively provides a segment of the population capable of identifying systemic flaws that neurotypical minds might overlook or rationalize due to social pressures.

- **Innovation and Problem-Solving:** The deep focus on special interests, exceptional pattern recognition, and ability to think outside conventional social norms—all characteristic autistic traits—are powerful drivers of innovation. In complex, rapidly changing environments, an evolutionary strategy that maintains these problem-solving capacities is highly adaptive. Autism ensures a continuous supply of minds uniquely equipped to tackle challenges that require profound insight and non-linear thinking, offering a proactive means for humanity to evolve beyond current limitations.
3. **Resistance as a Form of Adaptation:**
- **Biological Resistance to Coercion:** If, as argued, modern colonial-capitalist systems are inherently traumatizing and misaligned with human nervous system needs, then an evolutionary persistence of traits that resist these systems is a proactive adaptation. Autistic traits like sensory sensitivity (which rejects overstimulation), need for predictability (which rejects chaos), and resistance to arbitrary authority (which rejects domination) are not passive deficits but active, embodied rejections of an unhealthy environment. The autistic nervous system is not merely reacting; it is actively signaling and resisting conditions that are detrimental to collective well-being.
 - **Preserving Authentic Connection:** In a world where authentic connection is often sacrificed for superficial social performance, autism's preference for genuine, unmasked interaction can be seen as a deliberate evolutionary effort to preserve the

capacity for true relational attunement. This isn't just a nostalgic longing for past social structures but a persistent biological drive to maintain the very basis of cooperative and healthy human societies against forces that seek to erode it.

In essence, autism's persistence isn't an accidental carryover; it's a dynamic and intentional evolutionary endowment that actively works to maintain critical cognitive and social diversity. It serves as a biological check against over-conformity, a source of unvarnished truth, and a well-spring of innovative thinking, all of which are essential for long-term human adaptation and resilience, especially in challenging and often oppressive societal contexts. It is for this very reason that controlling authoritarian regimes target neurodiversity, such as with the recent discussion around the implementation of social credit scores, which would disproportionately target and negatively affect autistic and neurodivergent individuals, resulting in their further marginalization as the next phase of the Western eugenics project.

This remains a threat not just for autistics but for every global citizen. We are all interconnected in a social web circling the planet and our health directly affects the planet's health, as indigenous wisdom has informed us. The colonial project remains active and ongoing, and the legacy of colonial violence continues in the present. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, reports document systematic rape used as a weapon of war: "Armies of males are gang raping women and brutally killing women and children... women are contracting AIDS through rape" (Daily Mail, 2025; Toxic Masculinity Removal & Accountability, 2025). This atrocity mirrors colonial-era practices of conquest and demonstrates how rape remains a central tactic of domination and cultural destruction. Likewise, in Gaza, contemporary colonial violence persists: "WHY is the whole world standing by, doing nothing, as the people of Gaza continue to suffer and die? The only explanation that makes sense... is the psychology of demonization, 'othering,' and dehumanization" (Zen & Tao, 2025). These examples show that colonialism is not a closed chapter of history but an ongoing structure of violence that continues to fracture nervous systems, perpetuate trauma, and pathologize distress behaviors. Autism must be interpreted in this broader political and historical context. Here's how these concepts are linked:

* **Colonial Violence and Nervous System Trauma:** colonial practices, including systematic rape and forced assimilation, fractured relational systems and rewired human nervous systems to tolerate control and compliance. This created a legacy of intergenerational trauma. Examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gaza illustrate how this violence continues to fracture nervous systems, perpetuate trauma, and pathologize distress behaviors.

* **Rape as a Tactic of Domination:** Systematic rape is identified as a central tactic of domination and cultural destruction, mirroring colonial-era practices of conquest. This violence ensures that indigenous sensitivity, even in mixed populations, is subordinated under colonial rule.

* **Autism as an Embodied Legacy of Colonialism:** Autism is re-framed as both a socially constructed "disorder of civilization" and a neurological difference rooted in indigenous ancestry and relational sensitivity. The intermingling of colonizer DNA with indigenous lineages created descendants who carried forward hypersensitive nervous systems and neurological traits that were once adaptive in communal contexts but are now pathologized in coercive, capitalist societies. Therefore, autism prevalence cannot be disentangled from this history of conquest, forced genetic mixing, and intergenerational trauma.

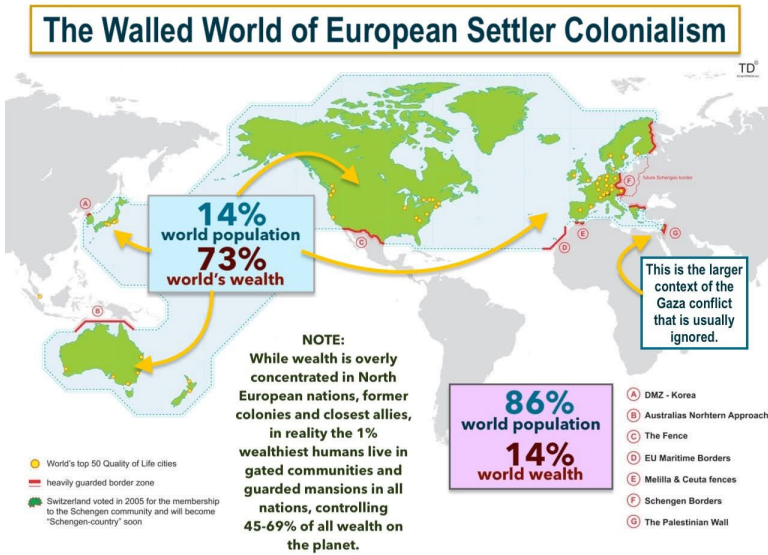
* **Demonization, Othering, and Pathologization:** diagnostic labels and psychiatric treatments, influenced by colonial paradigms, serve to define and manage deviance, reinforcing social order through control and exclusion. This process of "othering" and demonization pathologizes natural human responses to systemic trauma and labels divergence as disorder. Autistic traits, such as heightened sensory sensitivity or resistance to arbitrary authority, are seen as dysfunctional not because they are inherently impairing, but because they clash with environments engineered against human nervous system needs.

* **Autism as Evolutionary Resistance:** from this perspective, autism is not a deficit to be cured but an evolutionary critique of modernity. Autistic sensitivities are seen as embodied protests and signals that modern systems are unsustainable, testifying to a hunger for relational safety that capitalist-colonial systems have failed to provide.

The "deficit model" of autism and the pathologization of neurodivergence can be seen as a form of social control within capitalist-colonial systems. And just as autism can't be understood in isolation apart from historical contexts, the conflict in Gaza is part of a much longer global history of demonizing and othering, settler colonialism, displacement, and violence carried out by powerful nations. Countries like the U.S., U.K., Russia, France, China, Canada, Australia, and Saudi Arabia have all used similar strategies of conquest, and their weapons industries still profit from wars today. Public outrage often zeroes in on Israel while overlooking other abuses, such as the Uyghur crisis in China or the war in Yemen.

Israel is a paradox: Jewish people, long persecuted and displaced themselves, now use settlement and land acquisition strategies against Palestinians that mirror colonial patterns elsewhere. Palestinians, in turn, have committed violent acts too, tragic but understandable in the face of invasion and destruction. Blaming either side alone misses the larger systemic picture. At the heart of the issue is a global economic order rooted in colonialism and designed to enrich elites while keeping nearly half of humanity in poverty. Wars are treated as opportunities by the wealthy, not tragedies, and ordinary people, Israeli, Palestinian, or otherwise, are used as pawns. The beneficiaries are hidden elites who profit from weapons, propaganda, and division. The takeaway is not to excuse atrocities but to recognize that nearly every nation has blood on its hands, and that the cycle of violence ultimately serves the rich and powerful. "Eugenicists opposed social programs designed to improve the living conditions of the poor. They argued that adequate medical care, better working conditions, and minimum wages all harmed society because those measures enabled people with inferior heredity to live longer and produce more children" stated Dorothy Roberts in *The Dark Side of Birth Control, Killing the Black Body*.

Breaking free requires shifting attention away from fighting each other and toward exposing the global system that thrives on conflict and exploitation by weaponizing individual division through culturally normalized othering, seeing others as separate from one's self, and experiencing one's self as separate from the global organism.



This framing situates autism as both a biological inheritance and a sociological construct. On one hand, autism is rooted in evolutionary nervous system variations that predate capitalism and colonization. On the other, its pathologization arises from systems of domination that label relational intelligence as dysfunction. This dual understanding, that autism is both neurological and a social construct, explains why prevalence has increased under colonial-capitalist systems. Lori Hogenkamp (2025) emphasizes that autism prevalence, whether an increase in the number of autistic people or an increase in diagnosis of cases previously undetected, cannot be explained by a single artificial cause, such as vaccines, but rather by broader ecosystem stresses. In this sense, autism can be seen as a nervous system signal, communicating distress in environments marked by exploitation, sensory overload, and chronic unpredictability. It is not autism that is the disorder but the environment itself.

Reframing autism as a disorder of civilization requires situating it within broader patterns of social injustice. Intersectional theory

highlights how issues such as racism, sexism, ableism, and economic inequality all root back to relational distortions created by hierarchies of power (Snow, 2025). Power-over dynamics are not natural but artificially imposed constructs, legitimized through colonial practices of domination. Autism, in this framework, becomes an evolutionary critique of modernity: the refusal of certain nervous systems to comply with coercion. Autistic resistance to masking, compliance, and inauthentic socialization reveals the violence embedded in the deficit model of human worth.

The implications of this perspective are profound. Autism, viewed through a decolonial and trauma-informed lens, is not a deficit to be cured but a signal that modern systems are unsustainable. Autistic sensitivities, whether expressed as meltdowns, refusals to mask, or sensory overwhelm, are not flaws but forms of embodied protest, communicating that our systems are unsafe. As Tugaleva (2025) observes, “Our culture bred consumers and addicts. We eat too much, buy too much, and want too much... yet really, we are hungry for connection.” Autism testifies to this hunger for relational safety. Its very existence is an embodied message that capitalist-colonial systems have failed to provide the conditions required for human flourishing.

To summarize, autism must be reframed as both an evolutionary adaptation and a disorder of civilization. It is evolutionary because it preserves nervous system traits rooted in indigenous ancestry and relational intelligence. It is a disorder of civilization because its pathologization emerges only under colonial-capitalist systems that demand compliance and conformity. Modern examples of systemic rape in Congo and the genocide in Gaza demonstrate that colonialism is not historical but ongoing, and its legacies continue to fracture nervous systems across generations. Autism, then, is both archive and resistance: an embodied record of colonial trauma and a refusal to assimilate into oppressive systems. Its hypersensitivities are not deficits but truths and messages from the body that the deficit lies not in autistic individuals, but in civilization itself. The mirror is pointing inwards.

Defining Colonialism

Dr. Nicole Hagen Hess (2025) defines colonialism as “the extension of a nation's sovereignty over territory beyond its borders by the

establishment of either settler or exploitation colonies in which indigenous populations are directly ruled, displaced, or exterminated. Colonizing nations generally dominate the resources, labor, and markets of the colonial territory, and may also impose socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic structures on the indigenous population”. This definition highlights how colonialism targets not only land but also minds, languages, and bodies. This definition can certainly be extended to include the mindset of colonialists, as the imposition of socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic structures inherently reflects their worldview and rationale. The claim of "bringing civilization to the uneducated masses" serves as a primary justification and disguise for the underlying drive to dominate resources and fragment collective consciousness. This ideological component is crucial because it frames the colonial project not merely as a physical act of control, but as a moral imperative, making the "othering" and dehumanization of indigenous populations a necessary precursor to their exploitation. This mindset, therefore, is an integral part of how colonialism targets minds, languages, and bodies, by first devaluing and then restructuring them according to colonial ideals.

Colonialism and the History of Autism

Colonialism fractured ancestral nervous systems by severing relational ontologies embedded in language and kinship (Planet Babel). The systematic rape and forced assimilation of indigenous women during conquest left deep genetic and neurological imprints. Descendants inherited indigenous nervous system sensitivity intermingled with colonizer DNA, creating populations whose embodied attunement to danger was pathologized as dysfunction. As one commentator wrote on Twitter, “ADD, Autism and ADHD are only ‘disorders’ under capitalism. Otherwise, they are neurodivergence... different needs, thinking and working styles... They are only problems due to our hierarchies and modes of production” (@Staya_Stray, 2020).

Defining Neurodivergence

Due to the mismatch between neurodivergent biological wiring and colonial systems, capitalism is inherently traumatizing to autistic individuals, resulting in dysregulated autistic safety states which are pathologized through a neurotypical cultural lens. This reflection results in our

medical understanding of autism currently representing only what traumatized autistics are like. Dr. Jen Wolkin (2025) explains that PTSD and C-PTSD “are often described as a form of acquired neurodiversity... trauma is not a natural wiring but a wounding that, over time, becomes wiring.” David Gray-Hammond (2022) expands this further, arguing that neurodiversity is not a diagnostic category but the recognition that all human minds vary, and that pathologization is itself a political act and display of power and dominance. Janae Elizabeth (2020) clarifies how autistic safety states are often misread, because prosocial fawning is mistaken for wellbeing while authentic regulation is interpreted as dysfunction. Together, these perspectives show that neurodivergence is relational intelligence, not pathology. And through the vagus nerve, this relational intelligence can inversely indicate a profound dysfunction in the ways that we currently relate to each other in our society today.

Autism as an Evolutionary Consequence of Colonial Invasion

Lori Hogenkamp (2025) notes that autism cannot be traced to any single “artificial” cause; instead, prevalence reflects ecosystem stresses interacting with ancient genes. Framed this way, autism becomes the evolutionary consequence of colonial invasion and forced genetic mixing. Indigenous nervous systems carried heightened sensitivity; when interwoven with colonizer lineages, their descendants manifested traits once adaptive for relational societies but misfit for coercive environments. Autism is thus a visible remnant of indigenous ancestry reframed as disorder under capitalist modernity.

One of the ways that the genetic mixing with the colonizer’s genes impacts the prevalence and experience of autism is through epigenetics. Epigenetics refers to changes in gene expression that do not involve alterations to the underlying DNA sequence but affect how genes are read and expressed. These changes can be influenced by environmental factors, including stress and trauma, and can be passed down through generations. In the context of colonial invasion and forced genetic mixing, the severe and prolonged stress, violence, and trauma experienced by indigenous populations (including systematic rape, displacement, and cultural suppression) would have profoundly impacted their epigenetic markers. When indigenous individuals, carrying nervous systems adapted for relational safety and attunement, intermingled genetically

with colonizers, their offspring inherited both indigenous genetic predispositions and epigenetic alterations influenced by the traumatic colonial environment. Thus, while the "autism genes" or predispositions might have always been present in indigenous populations (where they were adaptive and valued), the colonial context, including the genetic mixing under duress and the resulting intergenerational trauma, would have created a new set of environmental stressors. These stressors would have then epigenetically altered how those indigenous genes expressed themselves. The previously adaptive traits (e.g., heightened sensory sensitivity, deep pattern recognition) would, under the new colonial-capitalist environment, become maladaptive, leading to behaviors now pathologized as "disorder."

Therefore, genetic mixing is not about introducing "new autism genes" or finding a definitive "cause" of autism that can be "cured" but rather about how existing indigenous genetic sensitivities are expressed and perceived under the epigenetic influence of colonial trauma and within a fundamentally coercive social system. The colonizer's genes, when combined with indigenous genes, create a new genetic landscape where the expression of these sensitivities is then further shaped by the ongoing, transgenerational trauma of colonialism, resulting in the higher prevalence and pathologization of autism we observe today. It's the interaction of ancestry, epigenetics, and environment that creates the "disorder of civilization."

Synaptic Pruning and Evolutionary Adaptation

As Jordan James (2025) hypothesized, disruptions in synaptic pruning can leave individuals developmentally "stuck" at earlier stages, retaining heightened sensitivity across the lifespan. Neuroscience confirms that atypical pruning is implicated in autism, ADHD, and dyslexia (Fusco et al., 2021). Reframed as adaptation, this pruning difference reflects hunter-gatherer nervous systems designed for vigilance and depth of perception, now maladapted to capitalist overstimulation. Autistic hypersensitivity is therefore not a flaw but evidence of fidelity to ancestral modes of being.

Colonial Violence, Rape, and Autism Prevalence

The colonial strategy of raping and assimilating indigenous women was both genocidal and genetic. It ensured that indigenous sensitivity lived on but under domination. These mixed lineages carried the heightened neurological attunement of indigenous ancestry, yet colonial cultures dismissed such traits as defective. Autism prevalence today cannot be separated from this history. What psychiatry calls pathology is instead the embodied legacy of colonization, a nervous system archive of both trauma and resilience (How Autism and Decolonial Theory are Interrelated).

Autism as a Disorder of Civilization

Intersectional theory demonstrates that all social justice issues root back to relationality. Hierarchies and power-over dynamics are not natural but colonial constructs (Conclusion). Autism is best understood as a disorder of civilization and a mismatch between nervous systems wired for reciprocity and cooperation with societies engineered for domination and extraction. Autistic resistance to masking, compliance, and inauthentic socialization exposes the violence of conformity and reframes autism as an evolutionary critique of modernity.

Conclusion

Autism is not a pathology but a message. It testifies to the evolutionary memory of relational nervous systems disrupted by colonialism. Autistic sensitivities are warnings, the canary in the coalmine, alerting us that our culture is unsafe. As Vironika Tugaleva (2014) reminds us, “Our culture bred consumers and addicts. We eat too much, buy too much, and want too much... yet really, we are hungry for connection.” Autism, in its very existence and through its heightened sensitivity and over abundant synapses, exposes this hunger. It shows through the very social discordance that colonialism uses to define it the mismatch between our evolutionary biology and social norms; our nervous systems are wired for connection, and autism as a condition exposes capitalist-colonial systems that oppose the very conditions required for human flourishing. The sensitivities of autistic people are not deficits but truths: embodied reminders that the real deficit lies in civilization itself.

Strange Situation: A Western Cultural Artifact and Object Critical to Identifying the Matrix and Rubrix of Colonial Occupation

Thesis: Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation (SS), specifically its repeated cross-cultural classification failures in non-Western, collectivist contexts and its normalization of emotional avoidance in Western children, functions as a critical cultural artifact that exposes the settler colonial matrix by codifying relational trauma and the isolated nuclear family model as the normative myth of healthy attachment.

A cultural artifact, in the language of critical theory, is a mirror that reflects the hidden logic of its society. Ainsworth's Strange Situation experiment (1969) is such an artifact. Developed to support John Bowlby's attachment theory, the study staged separations between caregiver and infant to observe how children responded to distress. Ainsworth's caregiver sensitivity hypothesis proposed that mothers who consistently and promptly respond to an infant's signals foster secure attachment, while inconsistent or distant responses yield insecurity. This experiment became a cornerstone of developmental psychology and the basis for what is now considered "normal" attachment.

Yet the Strange Situation's results differed sharply between Uganda and Baltimore. In Uganda, where caregiving was communal and attunement continuous, infants displayed strong distress during separations but quickly soothed upon reunion. In Baltimore, American infants were less reactive to separations, signaling emotional suppression rather than security. When Ainsworth's classifications were later tested in Germany, results became even harder to categorize, as children's cultural conditioning toward independence mimicked avoidant attachment. These cross-cultural inconsistencies reveal that attachment behaviors are not universal but socially constructed reflections of relational ecology. What

Western science mistook for “secure independence” was often learned emotional avoidance. Fanon described colonialism as a “rationally pursued mutilation.” It destroys not just land and culture but the psychic architecture of connection. The Strange Situation documents this mutilation empirically. Its failure to replicate across cultures exposes how settler colonialism fractures consciousness into discrete, self-contained units. The nuclear family becomes the colony’s smallest administrative cell, disciplining emotional life through isolation.

Ainsworth’s contrasting findings in Uganda and the United States demonstrate the colonial reengineering of attachment. In the West, individualism is internalized as virtue, and dependence is pathologized. The experiment, therefore, functions as a diagnostic of empire: it reveals how colonial rationality severs the nervous system’s natural orientation toward co-regulation. The emotional flatness of American infants is not an anomaly but a cultural adaptation to authoritarian structures. It mirrors the colonial subject who learns to detach from feeling in order to survive domination. Through Fanon’s lens, Ainsworth’s data become a record of psychological occupation, where emotional repression ensures social control.

Colonization is more than a geographical act. It is an ontological severance that fragments the human field of connection into isolated selves. It is a fish swimming in an ocean of other fish yet perceiving itself alone. This illusion of separateness defines not only how societies govern but how they raise their children. Settler colonialism’s most enduring project is the reorganization of relational life. It replaces communal belonging with emotional isolation and reproduces fragmentation as a cultural norm.

Human behavior, contrary to the Western biomedical model, cannot be understood in isolation. It is inherently relational, emerging from dynamic exchanges of attunement, co-regulation, and safety. When relational fields are ruptured, cognition itself becomes distorted. This is why the underfunding of social-emotional learning programs in U.S. schools and the neglect of relational health in psychological models reflect a deeper cultural pathology. Through my own experience of healing trauma and co-regulating with my son, I witnessed measurable

developmental change when connection, empathy, and felt safety were restored. His i-Ready diagnostic showed 329 percent of average annual growth and a 66 percent reduction in problematic behaviors within ninety days. These results illustrate that healing is not merely intrapsychic but relational, that human consciousness itself is a shared field of regulation.

In her Ugandan observations, Ainsworth noted different forms of attachment behavior emerging from the collectivist and relational living circumstances of Ganda families (Rice, 2021). Her later Baltimore study required a more structured, mildly distressing situation to activate attachment behavior in American children, meaning that American children were not typically distressed by the absence of the caregivers, indicating a culturally normalized emotional avoidance in American infants that was not present in Ugandan babies. “Ainsworth considered both her American and Ugandan observations in the development of her theory and therefore concluded that maternal sensitivity is a universal construct. She argued that, across all cultural variations, infants have a need for a trusted and sensitive attachment figure. Since Ainsworth’s 1969 publication, the concept of maternal sensitivity has been significantly expanded upon and represented in a number of divergent ways in the literature” (Dawson 2018). The Strange Situation itself, and its attachment classifications have been difficult to replicate across different cultural contexts; for instance, certain groups in Germany prioritize independence, which can result in children exhibiting more "avoidant" behavior in the Strange Situation (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1991, 1999).

In her "Strange Situation" experiment, Mary Ainsworth (1969) observed the attachment behaviors of infants, typically between 12 and 18 months old, in a series of carefully orchestrated separations and reunions with their primary caregiver. The experiment involved a structured sequence of eight episodes, each lasting approximately three minutes, designed to progressively increase the infant's stress. These episodes included:

1. Caregiver and infant together in a room with toys.
2. Infant explores with caregiver present.
3. A stranger enters the room.
4. Caregiver leaves the room, leaving the infant with the stranger.

5. Caregiver returns, stranger leaves.
6. Caregiver leaves the room, infant is alone.
7. Stranger returns.
8. Caregiver returns, stranger leaves.

Ainsworth's earlier research in Uganda (1967) heavily influenced her later work in Baltimore with American infants. A key difference observed was in the typical reactions to separation. In Uganda, infants accustomed to collectivist living and often cared for by multiple family members within a relational context tended to exhibit less overt distress when their primary caregiver briefly left. This was partly attributed to the constant presence of a supportive social network and a high degree of physical proximity and responsiveness from various caregivers. Conversely, in the Baltimore study, American infants, generally from more individualistic cultural contexts where primary care often falls predominantly on one caregiver, exhibited more pronounced distress during the "Strange Situation" separations. Ainsworth noted that American infants often showed "protest" behaviors upon separation, but also, in some cases, a culturally normalized "suppression of protest" or emotional avoidance when reunited, indicating an adaptation to less consistently responsive caregiving. These observations led Ainsworth to categorize different attachment styles (secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent/resistant), highlighting how cultural contexts shape both caregiving practices and children's emotional responses to separation and reunion.

LOVE AND ATTACHMENT STYLE

Secure • positive, stable view of self • positive, stable view of others • interdependent • comfortable with intimacy • open & trusting • sees self as equal partner • tends to stay connected when apart • sets & respects boundaries • relies on self & others to manage distress • welcomes diverse perspectives • seeks connection, provides space	Anxious (Pursuer) • negative, insecure view of self • positive, stable view of others • tends toward dependence • fear of losing relationship • emotional ups and downs • elevates partner above self • tends toward clinginess when apart • worries about being disappointed or abandoned • anxious with diverse perspectives • tends to be the pursuer in the relationship
Avoidant (Withdrawer) • positive, unstable view of self • negative insecure, view of others • independent & self-reliant • fearful of intimacy • elevates self above partner • reluctant to rely on others • views dependence as sign of weakness • sets rigid boundaries (puts up walls) • challenges diverse perspectives • seeks distance, avoids attachment • avoids or withdraws from conflict	Fearful (Disorganized) • negative, insecure view of self • negative, insecure view of others • seeks & avoids closeness • longs for love & rejects intimacy • struggles with scorekeeping • fluctuates between expressive/supportive & distant/unavailable • sets & then doesn't maintain or respect boundaries • embraces & rejects diverse perspectives • pursues & withdraws to avoid being hurt



Michel Foucault's concept of biopower describes how modern states exercise control through the regulation of life itself. In this framework, Ainsworth's study becomes an instance of anatomopolitics, the governance of emotion at the level of the body. American children's avoidant attachment styles reveal not individual dysfunction but collective conditioning to repression. This conditioning is gendered and racialized, reflecting the patriarchal and colonial disciplining of emotional expression.

Audre Lorde called this "the creative tension of differences," the friction between worlds that births awareness. Ainsworth's comparison between Ugandan and American infants creates such a tension. Where Ugandan relational life reflects power-with, the American model reflects power-over. Lorde argued that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house, yet the Strange Situation inadvertently exposes those tools, the metrics of control disguised as science. The contrast between cultures

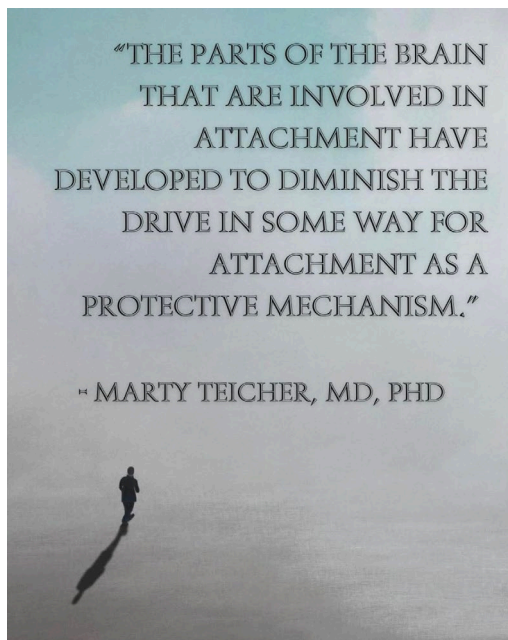
becomes a mirror, revealing how emotional detachment is sanctified as maturity within Western biopolitical regimes.

As a cultural artifact, the value of Ainsworth's Strange Situation compared across cultures lies in disrupting the false Western binary separating biological development with social development, because it shows how human behavior unfolds as a result of "complex interactions between genes and environment" (Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, Subramaniam and Willey 2021). But it is this very disregard to the importance of social development that causes relational trauma. Relational trauma manifests as dysfunction and disorder, the nervous system communicating distress that the body and mind is unable to find words for. As a culture we are socialized to disregard ourselves, and so we disregard our importance to each other. The dialectic tension of differences between Ainsworth's two sets of separate results creates the "creative tension of differences" which Lorde discusses in her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1979) where Ainsworth inadvertently exposes the tools of the oppressive system through the contrast between dominant and dominated, "cultured" West and "uncultured" African divides. Lorde would refer to this divide as a "fund of necessary polarities" that can spark new ideas and ways of being and belonging that exist outside of our current colonial framework.

Key Terms Defined:

- **Dialectic Tension of Differences:** This refers to the dynamic and often oppositional relationship between two distinct sets of observations or ideas. In Ainsworth's case, it's the contrast between the attachment behaviors of Ugandan infants in a collectivist setting and American infants in an individualistic setting. This tension isn't just a simple comparison; it's a force that reveals deeper truths and contradictions within existing systems.
- **Creative Tension of Differences:** A concept from Audre Lorde, this describes how the clash or interaction between different, often opposing, perspectives or experiences can lead to new insights, innovative solutions, and transformative change. Instead of simply highlighting conflict, it emphasizes the generative potential that arises when diverse viewpoints are brought into conversation.

- **The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House:** This powerful quote by Audre Lorde argues that genuine liberation and systemic change cannot be achieved by using the same ideologies, methods, or frameworks that created and maintain the oppressive system in the first place. Applying this to Ainsworth's study suggests that Western-centric psychological tools and interpretations, even when used to critique, might still be limited by the very colonial mindset they inadvertently expose.
- **Fund of Necessary Polarities:** Also from Lorde, this refers to the inherent existence of contrasting elements or ideas that are crucial for understanding the world and fostering growth. These polarities (like dominant/dominated, individualistic/collectivist) are not merely problems to be resolved but fundamental aspects of reality that, when engaged with consciously, can illuminate new pathways and possibilities beyond existing oppressive structures.



In the 1930's, as fascism swept through Europe, one Jewish German Social Scientist named Erich Fromm uncovered how parents can prevent raising a future Nazi. Studying the values, beliefs, family life and parenting practices of everyday Germans with his assistant Hilda Weiss in Weimar Germany, Fromm went beyond blaming propaganda or economic hardship and was able to define the personality of a Nazi supporter as what became known in sociology as the "authoritarian personality." According to a video by Violeta. Parenting. science in Instagram, "the kind of parenting that leads to this personality is strict authoritarian parenting where obedience is valued over independent thought, fear-based discipline where love depends on submission to coercion, and rigid hierarchies where children learn to fear power and later seek security in strong leaders." Children raised this way never learn how to handle independence because they learned how to obey without learning how to think for themselves and they can only follow rules but not make choices. Freedom feels overwhelming, risky, and dangerous. This is the root of the epidemic of avoidance currently affecting the entire nation. The same mechanism leading modern individuals to avoid personal emotional triggers, "ghost" while dating or have difficulty discussing uncomfortable/difficult topics is the very same mechanism that causes adults to follow leaders blindly and surrender the burden of choice to an authority or higher power. This results in two dangerous tendencies which frequently manifest in the same person, Masochism, a need to submit to authority, and Sadism, a need to dominate others. Together these two traits fuel the psychology of fascism and lay the foundation for Nazism.



Mary Ainsworth's work came later with her landmark research on attachment beginning in the 1950s–1960s, about two decades after Erich Fromm's studies in Weimar Germany. However, her findings empirically confirmed and deepened many of the psychological dynamics that Fromm had theorized. Her studies revealed that when caregivers use fear, withdrawal of affection, or rigid control to manage children, the child's nervous system becomes chronically dysregulated, a state now understood as relational PTSD or C-PTSD. Such children learn that autonomy threatens connection, so they suppress authentic emotion and comply to preserve safety. As adults, this conditioning manifests not only in personal avoidance and difficulty confronting conflict, expressing dissent, or tolerating uncertainty, but also in collective obedience. When a society's citizens are predominantly shaped by insecure or avoidant attachment patterns, they become less likely to rebel or riot, not because they agree with authority, but because their nervous systems are wired to equate disobedience with abandonment and identity fracturing/annihilation. In this way, trauma-based attachment conditioning becomes the invisible mechanism through which authoritarian systems sustain control.

Fromm, working within a sociological and psychoanalytic framework, intuitively described how authoritarian family structures produce submissive, fear-based personalities that later seek security in power hierarchies. Ainsworth, through careful observation of infant-caregiver relationships, demonstrated how those very patterns take root in early attachment, showing how children raised in environments of conditional love, control, or emotional inconsistency develop avoidant or anxious attachment styles. So while Fromm identified the social consequences of authoritarian parenting (the rise of fascist psychology), Ainsworth later illuminated the developmental mechanism behind it and the way early relational trauma programs the nervous system for obedience, avoidance, and dependency on external authority.

In essence:

- Fromm explained what happens socially when love is replaced by control.
- Ainsworth explained how it happens psychologically and biologically.

Together, their research forms a continuous arc from the authoritarian family to the traumatized attachment system, to the compliant citizen who fears rebellion as much as abandonment. And perhaps even more significantly, when taken together, Fromm and Ainsworth's work prove the existence of a strong link between our biology, neurology, and our social environments, in effect proving correct the theories and work of polyvagal and trauma specialists Porges and Mate years prior to their inception.

Relational PTSD is the most common and least talked about form of PTSD, because trauma is the root of all social injustice and the foundational part of the unseen rubrix of strategies and matrix of technology of oppression that is inherent to colonialism. Women are more likely to experience PTSD than men, both in the general population and among veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], 2025). This may be due to biological factors, social experiences, and the nature of the trauma experienced. In the U.S., approximately 7% of veterans develop PTSD at some point in their lives (VA, 2025). The idea that relational PTSD is the least talked about despite being the root of all social injustice stems from a critical perspective on how trauma, particularly relational trauma, is conceptualized, diagnosed, and discussed within dominant societal frameworks.

Why Relational PTSD is Under-discussed (and the Root of Social Injustice):

1. Individualized vs. Systemic Framing of Trauma:
 - Dominant Narrative (Individualized): PTSD, especially in mainstream discourse, is often framed as an individual pathology resulting from singular, acute, and typically extreme events (e.g., combat, natural disasters, severe accidents). This "event-based" understanding fits within the biomedical model, focusing on individual diagnosis and treatment. This is why veteran PTSD is often highlighted, it's a clear, definable event with a socially recognized impact.
 - Relational Trauma (Systemic/Ongoing): Relational PTSD, particularly Complex PTSD (C-PTSD), arises from prolonged, repeated, and often interpersonal

trauma, especially within early childhood or oppressive social systems. This kind of trauma is diffuse, ongoing, and embedded in the very fabric of relationships and society. When it's linked to "social injustice," it moves beyond individual events to highlight systemic issues like colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and economic exploitation. These are not "events" but persistent, often invisible, environments of threat and disconnection.

2. Lack of Formal Recognition and Conceptualization:
 - **DSM Limitations:** As noted in this book, C-PTSD (a form of relational trauma) is not formally yet recognized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as a distinct diagnosis from PTSD. This lack of official diagnostic status limits research, funding, and public awareness. If it's not a clear diagnostic category, it's harder to "talk about" in clinical, academic, and public spheres.
 - **"Invisible" Nature of Relational Trauma:** Relational trauma often involves emotional neglect, manipulation, gaslighting, and the constant undermining of selfhood within relationships or social structures. These are often less visible than physical violence or war and can be normalized within patriarchal or authoritarian systems. This book specifically mentions "state-sanctioned parenting practices based in authoritarianism" and "power-over relational dynamics" as inherently traumatizing, yet these are culturally often seen as normal, not as sources of trauma.
3. Societal Discomfort with Systemic Critique:
 - **Blaming the System vs. Blaming the Individual:** Acknowledging relational PTSD as the root of social injustice means holding societal structures (like capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy) accountable for widespread trauma. This challenges the individualistic ethos of Western societies, which often prefer to pathologize individuals ("bad kids," "narcissists," "mentally ill") rather than examine systemic flaws. It's less disruptive to the status quo to treat individual PTSD in veterans than to dismantle the systems that create pervasive relational trauma.

- Weaponization of Dysregulation: This book explicitly states, "Imperial systems weaponize dysregulation to limit citizens' executive functioning skills, life chances and freedom." If relational trauma keeps populations in a state of dysregulation, this serves the interests of oppressive systems by making people less capable of collective action and critical thought. Talking about this connection openly would expose the mechanisms of control.
- 4. The "Unseen Rubric of Strategies":
 - Colonialism and other oppressive systems operate through a "matrix of technology" that fragments identity, promotes competition, and alienates individuals from their collective self. This "mutilation of psyche and cognitive shift from relational identity to individualized identity" is inherently traumatizing. The trauma isn't always overt physical violence; it's the constant assault on relational safety and the imposition of a worldview that goes against human biological wiring for connection.
 - When trauma is embedded in the very ways we relate, parent, and structure society, it becomes normalized and therefore "least talked about" because it's the air we breathe. The pervasive nature makes it invisible.
- 5. Focus on External vs. Internalized/Embodied Experience:
 - This book highlights that trauma creates an "inability to put feelings into words" and that "emotions become internalized into the body." When trauma manifests as behavioral issues, emotional dysregulation, or even physical illness, these are often treated as individual deficits or biological problems rather than the embodied communication of relational wounds. Society is more comfortable addressing surface symptoms than the deeper, often unarticulated, relational pain. This is the reason why the system is currently discussing implementing social credit scores: it further deflects responsibility for issues it causes onto the suffering individuals, cast as scapegoats for problems the system itself has created but refuses to hold itself accountable and address.

Basically, while the effects of relational trauma (mental illness, substance abuse, social discord) are widely discussed, the root cause in

systemic social injustice and fractured relationality is less acknowledged because it challenges fundamental societal structures and requires a shift from individual blame to collective responsibility. The mechanisms of colonialism and power-over dynamics actively obscure this connection, ensuring that the pervasive trauma they inflict remains "least talked about" in its true, systemic scope. This absence of specific studies on PTSD among women and children experiencing domestic abuse, despite clear indications of higher risk, can be understood as a direct consequence of the systemic issues highlighted later in this book, particularly the undervaluation of women's labor and suffering within capitalist-colonial systems. No studies have been completed to determine specific numbers for PTSD among women and children experiencing trauma from domestic abuse, but studies suggest that women and children are at higher risk of developing PTSD following exposure to domestic violence (National Center for PTSD, 2025; StatPearls, 2023). Children and adolescents who experience traumatic events, including domestic abuse, have a very high risk of developing PTSD. Approximately 45 million children will be exposed to violence during childhood. Approximately 10% of children are exposed to domestic violence annually, and 25% are exposed to at least 1 event during their childhood. Ninety percent are direct eyewitnesses of violence (StatPearls, 2023). Because they are more oriented towards social interactions and relationships, women and children are the true face of PTSD, not men and not veterans.

1. Invisible Trauma, Invisible Problem: relational trauma, especially within patriarchal and authoritarian systems, is often "invisible" and normalized. Domestic abuse, by its very nature, is often hidden and culturally stigmatized. If the dominant narrative struggles to even formally recognize Complex PTSD (C-PTSD), which often stems from such relational trauma, it's less likely to fund or prioritize research into specific, "invisible" populations like women and children enduring abuse within the private sphere of the home. Their suffering is not seen as a public health crisis demanding large-scale study, but rather as individual, isolated incidents.
2. Undervaluation of Women's Experience and Labor: the value of unpaid labor performed by women is an estimated \$10.8 trillion globally each year, representing a massive contribution to the

world economy that is often overlooked and disproportionately borne by women. This profound undervaluation extends beyond labor to their lived experiences and suffering. If women's contributions are systemically ignored and uncompensated, their trauma, particularly that arising from domestic contexts, is likewise deprioritized in terms of research and resource allocation. Studying their PTSD would necessitate acknowledging the immense societal cost of domestic violence, a cost that capitalist systems benefit from by externalizing the consequences of fractured relationality.

3. **Weaponization of Dysregulation and Systemic Critique Avoidance:** Imperial systems weaponize dysregulation to limit citizens' executive functioning skills, life chances and freedom. Conducting studies that quantify PTSD in women and children from domestic abuse would expose a significant, systemic source of dysregulation directly linked to patriarchal power structures. This would force a "societal discomfort with systemic critique," as it would mean "holding societal structures (like capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy) accountable for widespread trauma." It's less disruptive to the status quo to leave this area unstudied than to confront the deep-seated societal issues it would reveal.
4. **Individualized vs. Systemic Framing and "Least Talked About" Trauma:** PTSD is often framed individually, focusing on "singular, acute, and typically extreme events" (e.g., veteran PTSD). Relational PTSD, from "prolonged, repeated, and often interpersonal trauma," remains "least talked about" because it challenges the individualistic ethos. Domestic abuse, as a form of relational trauma, doesn't fit neatly into the "event-based" model preferred by dominant discourse. Its pervasiveness makes it normalized and, therefore, harder to see as a distinct research area when society is structured to overlook such systemic issues.
5. **Perpetuation of Patriarchy Through Relational Control:** Relational trauma is the tool by which patriarchal colonial culture maintains its social controls. Studying PTSD in this context would directly expose how these "power-over relational dynamics" within families traumatize and dysregulate,

particularly women and children. This would challenge the very "state-sanctioned parenting practices based in authoritarianism" and the "top-down hierarchical systems of authority" that the document identifies as inherently traumatizing and foundational to capitalist control. Acknowledging this trauma would undermine the mechanisms of control.

In essence, the lack of specific studies in this crucial area is not an oversight but a reflection of a system that benefits from the invisible, unquantified suffering of women and children, particularly when that suffering is a direct consequence of the very relational and economic structures it perpetuates. Quantifying this trauma would be a powerful form of "truth-telling and systemic critique" that these dominant systems are designed to suppress. The intersection of relational trauma and capitalist exploitation becomes the mental prison of the colonized wage slave's mind. The value of unpaid labor performed by women is an estimated \$10.8 trillion globally each year, representing a massive contribution to the world economy that is often overlooked and disproportionately borne by women. This vital work includes childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks, and its undervaluation contributes to global inequality and hinders women's participation in the paid workforce (Oxfam International; National Partnership for Women & Families; United Nations Development Programme). Relational trauma is the tool by which patriarchal colonial culture maintains its social controls. This begins with state sanctioned parenting practices based in authoritarianism and impacts the ways the West treats and views our children and our adult selves. I discuss later in this book direct historical connections between state sanctioned social programming efforts and Nazi propaganda, Rockefeller endorsed documents, and modern media that advocates authoritarian, power-over parenting practices. Decolonizing and subverting patriarchal relational norms then, must be founded in a commitment to the very mutual care and connection to each other that colonialism seeks to annihilate.

Habitus can be defined as a system of dispositions (tendencies, inclinations, or modes of perception, thought, and action) acquired through experience, particularly during early socialization within specific social conditions. It acts as a mediating force between individual agency and social structures, influencing how individuals perceive and react to the

world. Habitus is not a set of rigid rules but a generative framework that allows individuals to improvise and adapt within the constraints and possibilities of their social environment. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, while powerful in explaining the internalized social structures that shape behavior, gains a crucial physiological dimension when viewed through the lens of modern neuroscience, particularly the vagus nerve and the mind-body connection. Where Bourdieu emphasized social conditioning and cultural codes, we can now understand that these external influences are literally "wired in" at a biological level. The "dispositions" of habitus are not just abstract mental constructs but are deeply embodied, affecting nervous system regulation.

The persistent exposure to colonial practices, authoritarian parenting, and dysregulating capitalist systems, as discussed throughout this document, would not only shape an individual's habitus (their socialized tendencies and ways of being in the world) but would also profoundly impact their vagal tone and overall nervous system function. This "mutilation of psyche" and "cognitive shift from relational identity to individualized identity" described earlier is not merely a social or psychological phenomenon; it is a physiological one. A habitus formed under conditions of relational trauma and chronic stress would manifest as a nervous system predisposed to hypervigilance (fight/flight) or dissociation (freeze/shutdown), limiting the capacity for co-regulation and genuine connection. Thus, Bourdieu's habitus can be seen as the socio-cultural manifestation of nervous system states. The "cultural codes" become the learned patterns of nervous system response, passed down through generations (epigenetically and through social learning). When I state that "Imperial systems weaponize dysregulation to limit citizens' executive functioning skills, life chances and freedom," I am describing a deliberate manipulation of the habitus at its most fundamental, embodied level. The inability to self-regulate, the predisposition to react with fear or aggression, and the fragmented sense of self become embedded in the individual's habitus, making them more susceptible to control within the "matrix of technology" that colonialism employs. Reframing habitus in this way allows for a more holistic understanding of how social injustice becomes internalized and perpetuated through the very biology of human experience.

When Bourdieu tried to reconcile the works of Sartre (theoretical) with Lévi-Strauss (practical) with his concept of habitus in an attempt to explain social agents that dictate behavior as being more than just mechanical unconscious reflections of cultural codes, he didn't have the information that we have now about the vagus nerve and the mind/body connection. "Though typically not mentioned in studies of the nervous system, the context of colonialism and power-over culture is essential to understanding the mechanics of the modern human nervous system. The social systems that we have built are collapsing and the lack of a social safety net is impacting more and more people. We are all traumatized to some extent. Global warming, a pandemic, all of the -isms are danger signals to the body and it is very human to have overwhelming stress responses to these things. To ignore these aspects of our reality in the conversation about the nervous system would be a dire mistake." Trauma Geek, Janae Elizabeth posted on their Facebook social media account (June 24, 2025).

An "-ism" in terms of social justice refers to a system of prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a group of people based on a shared characteristic, and it is usually accompanied by power dynamics that allow the dominant group to enforce their biases. These "-isms" are not merely individual attitudes but are embedded in societal structures, institutions, and norms, leading to systemic disadvantage and oppression for the targeted group. They are often rooted in historical power imbalances and are perpetuated through cultural, economic, and political means.

Key characteristics of "-isms" in social justice include:

- **Systemic Nature:** They are not isolated acts of bias but are woven into the fabric of society, impacting laws, policies, practices, and cultural narratives.
- **Power Dynamics:** They involve a dominant group (who holds societal power) and a marginalized group (who is disempowered). The dominant group benefits from and perpetuates the "ism."
- **Prejudice + Power:** It's often defined as "prejudice plus power," meaning that mere prejudice (a biased attitude) becomes an

"ism" when it's backed by the institutional and systemic power to enact and maintain discrimination.

- Intersectional: "-isms" often overlap and intersect, meaning individuals can experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously (e.g., a Black woman may experience both racism and sexism, and these experiences are not merely additive but create a unique form of oppression).
- Normalization: Over time, the practices and beliefs associated with an "ism" can become so deeply ingrained that they are seen as "normal" or "natural," making them harder to identify and challenge.

Common examples of "-isms" include:

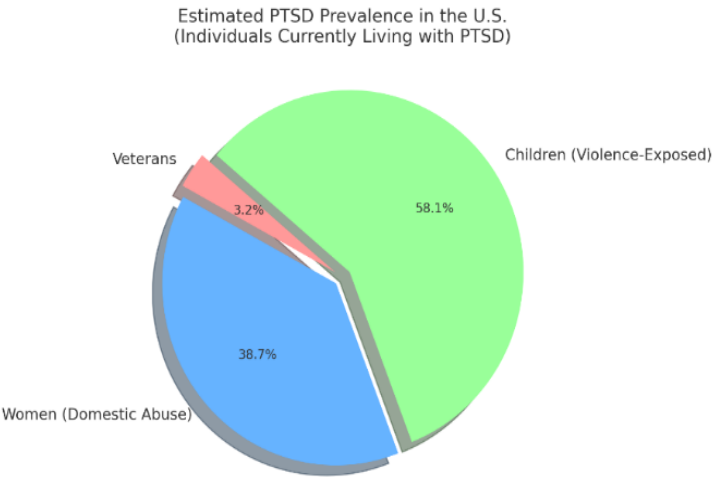
- Racism: Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior.
- Sexism: Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.
- Ableism: Discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior.
- Classism: Prejudice against or in favor of people belonging to a particular social class.
- Ageism: Prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age.
- Colonialism: A system of domination over territory, resources, and people, often imposing socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic structures, and can be seen as an overarching "ism" that fuels other.
- As Janae Elizabeth points out, these bombard us with danger signals from childhood. In childhood, consistent emotional attunement from caregivers is essential for developing a cohesive, regulated nervous system. When a child grows up in an emotionally unpredictable or unsafe environment, their nervous system adapts in self-protective ways, leading to fragmentation, a process where the child's physiological states (fight, flight, freeze, fawn) become disconnected rather than integrated.

Human and animal data also indicates significant differences exist between males and females in basal function of the autonomic nervous system. A dysregulated male nervous system, therefore, not only keeps women in a chronic state of fight or flight, but also compromises their capacity to serve as optimally regulated mothers, partners, caregivers and individuals. This directly impacts the survival and thriving of the next generation. Given that survival and nervous system health are the foundational, undeniable common denominators for our species' perpetuation, ensuring conditions where women can maintain a relaxed, parasympathetic state becomes a critical social justice issue. When men emotionally regulate their nervous systems, they contribute to a relational environment of safety, allowing women to exit hypervigilance. This enhanced physiological regulation in women directly translates to improved maternal and caregiving capacity, thereby optimizing the collective survival chances of our species. This connection highlights how individual nervous system regulation is not merely a personal matter but a fundamental requirement for species-level resilience and well-being. There is consistent data to suggest males have higher sympathetic, and females higher parasympathetic, cardiac autonomic activity. Your sympathetic nervous system is the part of your nervous system that carries signals related to your “fight-or-flight” response and the parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for the body's rest and digestion response when the body is relaxed, resting, or feeding. It basically undoes the work of sympathetic division after a stressful situation. This means that in order for women to stay in a relaxed state, men need to be able to regulate their own nervous systems. When they do not, women will be kept in a constant state of fight or flight. And a dysregulated nervous system can create a victim mentality, because it fundamentally shapes how a person perceives threat, power, and agency in the world.

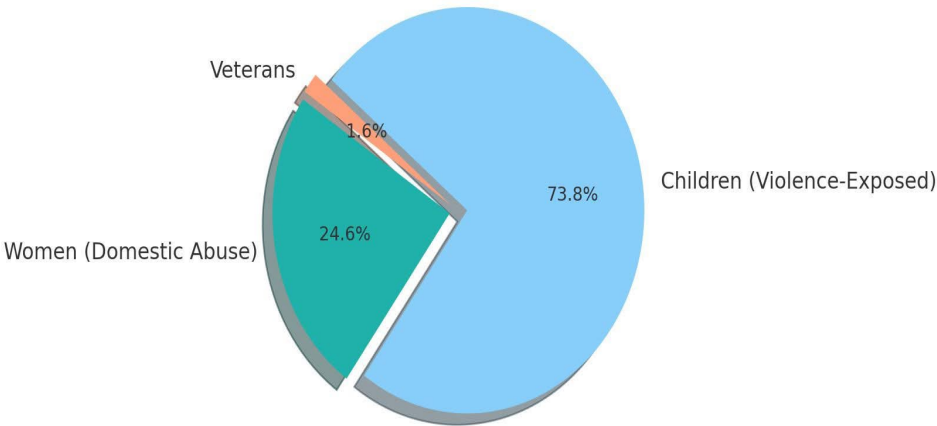
Measured levels of emotional health and awareness through Ainsworth's studies, alongside historical propaganda examples against healthy attachment parenting practices show how authoritarian government weaponizes our emotional and relational norms to keep its citizens

Autism In America

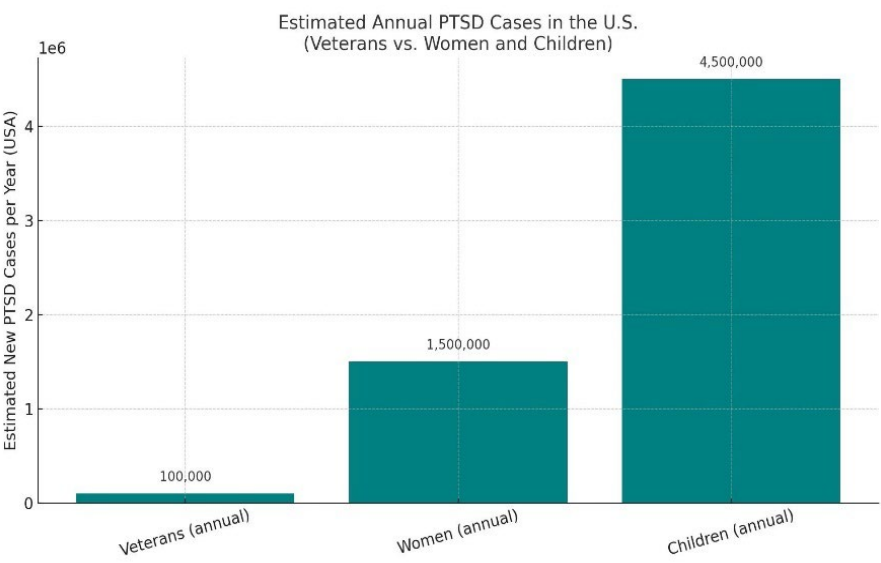
in an immature, traumatized state detached from their inner emotional experience, which evidence of social programming through state sanctioned parenting practices confirms.



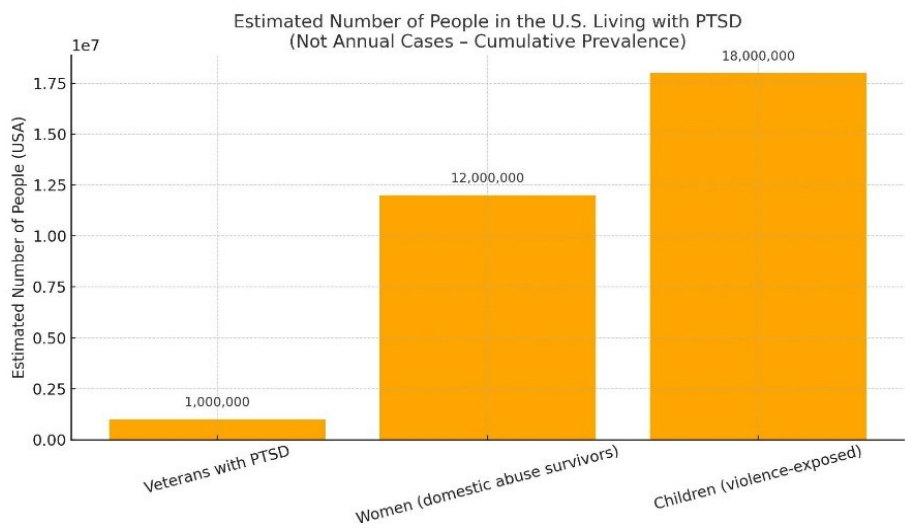
Estimated Annual PTSD Cases in the U.S. by Group



When your nervous system is in a heightened or dysregulated state, small social cues (especially ambiguous ones) can get amplified as threatening or hurtful because your nervous system is on alert for any sign of emotional dismissal or rejection. When power over dynamics are promoted by authoritarian state governments for application in family systems but power-over dynamics are inherently traumatizing to the nervous system, it puts children into a fragmented state, easily programmable as wage slaves for capitalism. The way that our society treats (and neglects) our children lies at the center of every single social justice issue, because this relationship to power and control shapes our adult relationships, social norms, governing systems, institutions of care, and every other system with a self-reinforcing and all-encompassing power over structure of self-imprisonment. This colonization of the human cognitive process which underlies Western culture is reliant on emotional trauma, and is being constantly linguistically programmed and socially reinforced through top-down, power-over relational norms and sanctions, leaving women and children with PTSD in an invisible and un-addressed health crisis that has systemic roots.



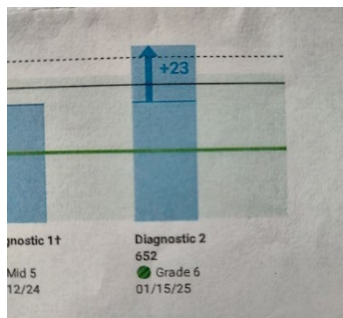
Autism In America



I have firsthand experience of this hidden health crisis in America. I was raised in a high conflict household where the adults were not very emotionally fluent and had fractured egos from their own unhealed childhood relational trauma that resulted in projecting pain and trauma outwards onto others, including me. I was defiant as a teenager because I was reacting to the abuse in my home, but instead of recognizing the impact their behavior had on me, I was kicked out of my home eight times beginning when I was 12 and when I was 16 my mother pulled a gun on me. My oldest son who is now an adult was diagnosed with conduct disorder as a child, and because I lacked the awareness and skills as a young parent, he was sent to residential care many times. The past becomes the present and future, this is how the cycle of generational trauma is perpetuated. Conduct disorder, like all behavioral and personality disorders, can be reframed using Autistic Standpoint Theory as normal reactions to systemic trauma, authoritative relational dynamics and power over matrix systems of social control. Behaviors often labeled as disorders, like conduct disorder, are actually normal reactions to systemic trauma and can be seen as communication of unmet nervous system needs rather than inherent pathologies. This perspective extends to behaviors associated with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), reframing them as responses to environmental and relational stressors within a colonial-capitalist

framework that prioritizes compliance and control over relational attunement and individual needs. I argue here that psychopathology may have genetic components, but ultimately these traits are features of their environment, and relate to trauma and milestones that may have been missed due to ruptures in attachment during formative periods of development during childhood.

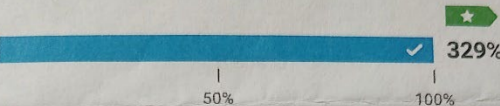
Being raised in an authoritative household caused me to choose controlling and neglectful partners that mirrored my parents and childhood home of origin. I realized following my mother's suicide and my following divorce that I was perpetuating the same behavioral patterns my parents had displayed in their own relationships, and I began to question and deconstruct everything. I ended up divorced at 41, homeless at first but determined to rebuild. Then struggling to heal two traumatized children with a heap of my own relational trauma in a culture that doesn't really provide any way to heal it, and doesn't want to hear it or talk about it. I have a son now who acts just like how my older son did and was labeled with conduct disorder too, but through understanding the nervous system and how it works I have come to understand behavioral and personality disorders as normal reactions to systemic trauma, authoritative relational dynamics and power over matrix systems of social control. Because I was forced to learn things the hard way I had to reverse engineer a solution. I was able to apply research like Ainsworth's study to understand and name what I never experienced, so that I could then try to imagine what it must be like and try to provide to my children what had been missing in my own childhood without any material and apparent real-life example to model from.



Year-to-Date Growth [Learn More About Growth](#)

Progress to Annual Typical Growth

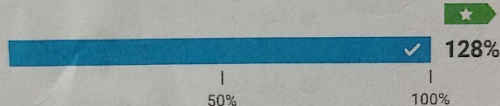
Scale Points: 23/7



This student has made 329% progress toward Annual Typical Growth. Typical Growth is the average annual growth for a student at this grade and placement level on their baseline Diagnostic.

Progress to Annual Stretch Growth®

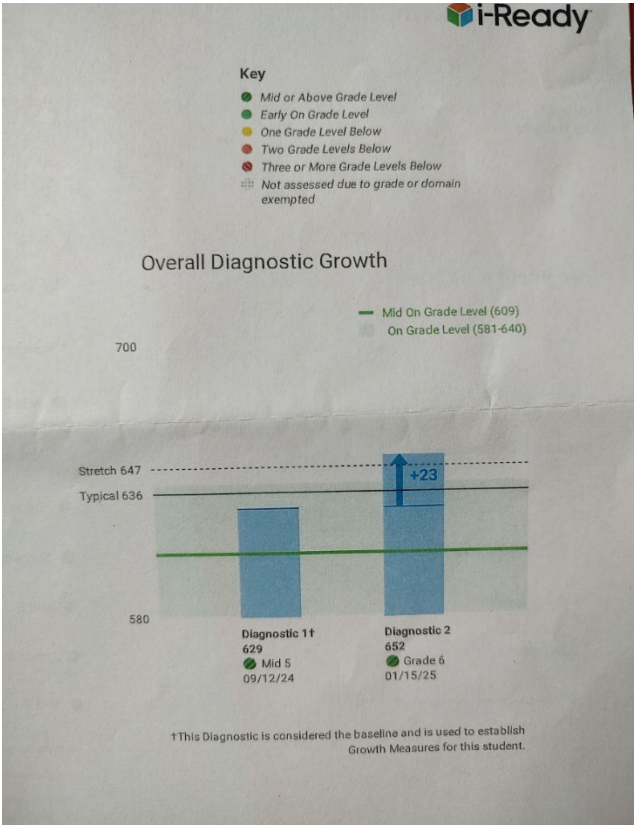
Scale Points: 23/18



This student has made 128% progress toward Stretch Growth. Stretch Growth is an ambitious, but attainable, level of annual growth that puts students who are not yet proficient (Mid On Grade Level or above) on their baseline Diagnostic on a path toward proficiency and helps students who are already on track for proficiency to achieve or maintain advanced proficiency levels.

This student will likely need to meet or exceed their Annual Stretch Growth target for at least 1 year to achieve their proficiency goals. This is based on students who placed similar to them and eventually achieved proficiency or maintained/achieved a Late On-Grade Level placement or above.

View the Historical Results report to review your student's previous Stretch data to understand their progress over multiple years.



As Lorde discussed, I have also "descended into the chaos of knowledge and returned with true visions of our future." By applying what I learned from my comparative analysis of the Strange Situation's cultural limits, and in learning about stress responses and shifting my lens to view behavior as communication of my own autistic children's unmet needs that they had no way of communicating in words, I shifted my parenting away from the authoritative and dismissive style I inherited from my own parents. I began practicing an egalitarian, attachment-based approach grounded in shared power, co-regulation, and empathy. The results of my son's most recent school testing speak volumes. While

one child's outcomes cannot be generalized, as a case study our family's history shows how shifting discipline from control to connection directly supports Ainsworth's findings: secure and attuned caregiving fosters thriving development. My son's accelerated academic progress is lived evidence of how relational parenting and felt safety translates into measurable developmental growth. Social justice will be achieved the moment that activists realize at its core structural injustice is an issue with how our nervous systems show up for and support one another.

My personal findings using my family as data would be to conclude that when we view trauma as an intersectional web of ruptures to our relational safety, accept that linear time is a colonial construct, and see the falsity behind binary labels and identities such as adulthood as a fixed state rather than human development being fluid, constant and individual yet interdependent states of being, then healing becomes possible at any point in the lifespan given the proper environment and social support system. After helping my son to heal and grow by understanding his behavior as communication, I was able to reflect on my own relational difficulties throughout my lifespan and I realized that my emotional avoidance and difficulty with attachment are the systemic features of structural violence that Ainsworth's study is drawing attention to, and my family is just one fractal of a much larger structural issue.

Ainsworth's study is an example of what Foucault referred to as anatomopolitics, or the exercise of power at the level of the individual (Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, Tompkins 2021) because American children show the effects of sanctioned state violence in the form of authoritative, top down parenting norms on social and emotional development and the culturally relative expression of them. Anatomopolitics, as described by Foucault, refers to a form of power that disciplines and regulates the human body at a micro-level, focusing on individual behaviors, habits, and capacities. It's about optimizing the body's utility and docility, transforming individuals into productive and manageable subjects within a larger social system. This form of power operates through detailed regulations, surveillance, and interventions that target specific aspects of individual life, from hygiene and sexuality, to physical training and emotional expression. In the context of Ainsworth's study, anatomopolitics is evident in how authoritative, top-down parenting norms, which are culturally sanctioned by the state, act as a

disciplinary force on American children. These norms directly shape their social and emotional development, influencing how they attach, express emotions, and interact with the world. The study reveals how power operates not just through overt political structures, but also through seemingly private family dynamics that are themselves influenced by broader societal and governmental ideologies. The "sanctioned state violence" is not necessarily physical, but rather the systemic imposition of relational styles that can lead to emotional detachment and dysregulation, thus molding individuals at the "level of the individual" to fit a particular societal mold. The goal is to create "normal" and compliant individuals by instilling specific behaviors and suppressing others. This is achieved through practices that categorize, evaluate, and correct deviations from established norms. Over time, individuals internalize these disciplinary mechanisms, leading to self-regulation and conformity without overt external force. They begin to discipline themselves according to societal expectations.

Ainsworth's Strange Situation can also be read through Cherríe Moraga's concept of theory in the flesh, which insists that knowledge is not abstract but inscribed within lived, embodied experience. In the experiment, infants' physiological and emotional responses, their cries, gestures, and silences, become data, yet within a colonial framework that separates mind from body, those embodied communications are misinterpreted as pathology rather than wisdom. Moraga's framework reclaims the body as the first site of knowing, revealing that what the Strange Situation recorded as "distress" was in fact the body's truthful resistance to forced separation and emotional neglect. The babies' reactions expose what colonial modernity seeks to erase: that attachment is not dependency but the foundation of human consciousness itself. Dean Spade's work on mutual aid and collective care extends this understanding beyond the family unit, framing caregiving as a political act that redistributes power and rehumanizes systems fractured by hierarchy. When the Strange Situation is viewed through these lenses, it becomes not a measure of attachment quality but a window into how societies teach disconnection. Moraga and Spade remind us that healing this rupture demands the reintegration of body and community, transforming relational care into collective resistance.

The intersection of biopower with Ainsworth's study exposes the repressed sexuality and emotional incest centered in the American Puritanical Christian family's historical past (Zinn 1996). Her work is also an example of subjectivity because it shows how human development and behavior is subject to the environment, and also shows how children in Western culture become objectified as subjects under adult authority, dominated under top down hierarchical relating and power over social structures with more physically matured guardians and mentors. Ainsworth's study shows how vectors of experience such as age difference between child and adult can also be a vector of social power (Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, LaFleur 2021). When a parent is closer in age to their child, the dynamic of social power can shift in several ways compared to a larger age gap.

1. **Reduced Authority Through Shared Experience:** A smaller age gap might lead to a parent and child having more shared cultural reference points, similar interests, or a more recent memory of navigating developmental stages. This can foster a more peer-like relationship, potentially reducing the traditional, inherent authority a parent holds simply due to age and life experience. The parent might be seen less as an unquestionable authority figure and more as a guide or even a confidante.
2. **Increased Empathy and Understanding (Potentially):** A younger parent might more readily recall the emotional landscape and challenges of childhood or adolescence, leading to increased empathy and a more nuanced understanding of their child's experiences. This can soften the power dynamic, replacing rigid control with more collaborative problem-solving.
3. **Blurring of Boundaries:** While empathy can be beneficial, a smaller age gap can also lead to blurred boundaries. The parent might struggle to maintain appropriate parental roles, seeking friendship or emotional support from the child rather than providing it. This can inadvertently shift emotional labor onto the child, which is a form of power imbalance where the child's needs are implicitly subordinated to the parents.
4. **Economic and Social Disadvantage:** Younger parents may be less established in their careers or socioeconomic standing, which can affect the resources and stability they can provide.

This external factor can impact the power dynamic within the family, as financial strain can introduce different forms of stress and control, or reduce the parent's perceived capacity to provide.

5. Less Hierarchical, More Relational: In general, a smaller age gap can lend itself to a less hierarchical and more relational style of parenting, provided the parent has adequate emotional maturity and support. This aligns with a "power-with" dynamic rather than a "power-over" one, where decisions might be made more collaboratively, and the child's voice holds more weight. However, without conscious effort to maintain appropriate boundaries and responsibilities, this can swing into a neglect of the child's need for clear guidance and structure.
6. Cultural and Generational Influences: The societal expectations of parenting evolve. Younger parents might be more attuned to contemporary parenting philosophies that emphasize child-centered approaches, emotional intelligence, and reducing traditional authoritarianism, which inherently diffuses some of the historical social power of the parent. Older parents might adhere more to traditional, hierarchical models influenced by their own upbringing.

While a larger age gap often reinforces a more traditional, top-down power structure based on experience and perceived wisdom, a smaller age gap has the potential to flatten this hierarchy, fostering a more egalitarian, empathetic, and relational dynamic. However, this also comes with the challenge of maintaining appropriate boundaries and ensuring the child's developmental needs for clear guidance and emotional support are met without placing undue burden on them. The shift is from an assumed, age-based authority to one that must be earned through attunement and consistent, responsible care.

The Strange Situation also illustrates the violence that settler colonialism (Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, Karuka 2021) and imperialism (Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, Streeby 2021) does to the psyche through deconstruction of collective and reformation of ego and identity as an individual "I" rather than a "we" and "us," which is evidenced in American and German babies' avoidance and emotional detachment behaviors. Ainsworth's work also goes one step further by also

exposing the cause of Western self-similarity, "sovereignty of self-forged against other axes of difference," socially sanctioned intolerance, and "othering" behavior" (Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, Chambers-Letson 2021) as disruptions to early attachment during critical periods of early childhood development. These ruptures to attachment directly relate to the Western epidemiological parenting philosophy. "Sovereignty of self-forged against other axes of difference" refers to the Western cultural emphasis on an independent, autonomous self that defines itself by distinguishing itself from others, particularly those who are different in terms of race, gender, class, or other social categories. This "sovereignty" isn't naturally occurring but is actively constructed by rejecting or marginalizing those who don't fit the dominant norm. It implies a self-identity built through a process of differentiation and often, exclusion. Socially sanctioned intolerance describes prejudice or discrimination that is not only accepted but actively supported or encouraged by societal norms, institutions, and cultural practices. It means that intolerance is not just individual bias but is woven into the fabric of society, making it seem normal, justifiable, or even desirable within that cultural context. "Othering" behavior is the act of perceiving or representing someone or a group as fundamentally different from oneself or the dominant group. This process often involves dehumanization or delegitimization, marking the "other" as outside the boundaries of normal or acceptable, thereby creating a sense of separation and often justifying discrimination, marginalization, or control. It's a way of defining an "us" by defining a "them."

Colonialism as an active and ongoing project has historically weaponized parenting norms and propagandized authoritarianism by normalizing "othering" through childist and adultist practices in a state effort to normalize and perpetuate power and control based relational dynamics. In the United States, Rockefeller backed psychologists (Holt, 1894) in the 20th century promoted "cry it out" and "self soothe" methods as scientifically backed parenting. Given this information, Americans should critically question why popular media outlets are currently reporting "Fuck Around and Find Out (FAFO)" as a new type of intolerant and authoritative, coercive and top-down punitive based parenting trend for 2025 (Keller 2025; The Wall Street Journal 2025). All of these trends historically push cultural narratives that result in an interruption

of the infant's ability to rely on caregivers to meet basic needs and also impacts the infant's developing ability to self soothe. This recent occurrence of mass media propaganda on parenting trends eerily matches similar patterns from Nazi Germany. A bestseller novel by Nazi physician Johanna Haarer called "The German Mother and Her First Child" (1934) advised mothers to ignore their babies' emotional needs and cries. Nazi propaganda also endorsed parenting practices designed to force children into obedience and compliance; these methods were promoted through popular German books and other media sources. These patterns in propaganda across fascist timelines with similar goals, to rupture attachment, also confirm what Ainsworth's work indicates: intentional social engineering used as a form of crowd control and as coercive state sanctioned means to manufacture compliance-based behaviors that are acquired through group norms and socialization programming.

Ultimately, Ainsworth's study indicates that 1) Human behavior is an accurate and valid form of communication for unmet nervous system needs when words are unable to express hidden emotions; 2) individualistic societies actively socialize their children through coercive tactics into compliance and emotional shutdown based behavior; 3) collectivist societies are more securely attached emotionally due to relationships brewing structured as power-with, not over, creating higher levels of emotional attunement, consistent co-regulation of nervous system, and heightened sense of belonging/social cohesion. Multiple correlations in academia, the medical and mental health fields linking Ainsworth's studies and attachment theory to the root cause of mental illness, substance abuse, and psychopathology. This means that the process of psychic and emotional starvation (and socially engineered crisis of childrearing, where American caregivers are woefully uneducated, kept in poverty and emotionally unequipped) is being weaponized by the government against its own population for the purpose of capitalist and material gain, denying citizens the life chances (the probabilistic opportunities proposed originally by Max Weber, 1949) that individuals have to achieve success and improve their lives. This is shaped by their social position, rather than just effort. It should be noted that this withholding of opportunity and privilege goes directly against the United States Constitution's (1787) promise to its citizens to pursue happiness and enjoy a life of liberty. The government (or the systems it perpetuates) benefits financially

from weaponized childcare practices, such as those promoting authoritative, attachment-rupturing methods, through several interconnected mechanisms that ultimately serve capitalist and material gain:

1. Creation of a Compliant and Manageable Workforce:
 - Reduced Resistance to Exploitation: When individuals are raised in environments that foster emotional detachment, dysregulation, and a fragmented sense of self (as a result of early attachment trauma), they are less likely to question authority, organize collectively, or resist exploitative labor practices. A dysregulated nervous system, predisposed to anxiety and a limited capacity for executive functioning, makes individuals more pliable and less likely to advocate for higher wages, better working conditions, or challenge corporate power structures.
 - Increased Productivity through Docility: Trauma-induced emotional shutdown and compliance can lead to a workforce that is more focused on individual survival and less on collective well-being. This can translate into employees who are less likely to take sick days, work longer hours, and accept less for their labor, all of which boost corporate profits and, by extension, tax revenues for the government.
2. Increased Demand for Disciplinary and Control Systems:
 - Growth of the Carceral State: The "fragmented state" and "programmable wage slaves" created by relational trauma often manifest in behavioral issues, mental health crises, and social discord. These outcomes necessitate increased spending on policing, incarceration, and other forms of social control. While these are government expenditures, they also create industries (private prisons, surveillance technology, security services) that generate profits and contribute to the economy, often through government contracts.
 - Expansion of Mental Health and Pharmaceutical Industries: A population experiencing widespread relational trauma and dysregulation will inevitably show

higher rates of mental illness, addiction, and chronic stress-related physical ailments. This fuels the growth of the mental health industrial complex and the pharmaceutical industry. These industries generate significant revenue, contribute to the GDP, and are often regulated by or receive funding from the government, further embedding the economic benefit. The "pathologizing of distress as deficit and disorder" effectively turns human suffering into a market for diagnosis and treatment.

3. Diversion of Resources and Responsibilities:

- **Externalization of Social Costs:** By promoting child-care practices that lead to relational trauma, the state externalizes the true costs of social reproduction and well-being onto individuals and families. Instead of investing in robust social safety nets, universal child-care, comprehensive parent education, and accessible mental health services (which would prevent much of this trauma), the government benefits from a system where these responsibilities are privatized or underfunded. This allows for lower taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals, diverting public funds towards other priorities (like military spending or corporate subsidies) that may directly benefit the state or its allies.
- **Undermining Collective Action:** The "cognitive shift from relational identity to individualized identity" fostered by these practices makes it harder for citizens to recognize their shared struggles and organize for collective change. When individuals are isolated and focused on personal survival, they are less likely to demand systemic reforms that might challenge the economic status quo. This fragmentation prevents the emergence of a collective political will that could push for policies detrimental to capitalist accumulation, such as universal healthcare or higher social welfare spending.

4. Perpetuation of Economic Inequality:

- **Maintaining a Hierarchy:** The concept of "life chances" (Max Weber) is directly impacted. By creating conditions for nervous system distress and disorder from early childhood, the system limits individuals' "probabilistic opportunities" for success and upward mobility. This ensures a constant supply of labor for low-wage jobs and perpetuates economic hierarchies that benefit those at the top. The "colonization of the human cognitive process" ensures that individuals remain in a state less capable of disrupting these power structures.
- **Exploitation of Unpaid Labor:** As noted elsewhere in this book, the undervaluation of women's unpaid labor (estimated at \$10.8 trillion globally) is a massive contribution to the world economy. Weaponized parenting practices, often disproportionately impacting women as primary caregivers, ensure this labor remains invisible and uncompensated. This hidden subsidy to the capitalist system allows for greater profits in the paid workforce, as the costs of childcare and domestic maintenance are borne privately rather than collectively.

In essence, the "weaponized childcare practices" generate a population that is, by design, more vulnerable, less resilient, and less able to collectively challenge systemic exploitation. This state of dysregulation and fragmented identity serves to maintain and expand the power and wealth of dominant capitalist structures, from which the government, through taxes, contracts, and the stability of its economic system, ultimately derives financial and political benefit. State sanctioned socially engineered attachment trauma sets its own citizens up for failure by creating conditions for nervous system distress and disorder (trauma), which capitalist structures and systems then pathologize as part of its matrix of control and rubric of strategy. Trauma creates an inability to put feelings into words, and emotions become internalized into the body, creating dysfunction (Mate 2022, Porges 2011). When understood through a trauma informed lens and seen through the amygdala, fight or flight response, and body/mind connection through the vagus nerve,

mental illness can be reframed as fear of remembered trauma and avoidance of familiar pain as well as a form of state sanctioned violence against its own citizens.

Build Up Michigan, child advocacy group and parent educators, state in a social media post that “there are no bad kids—just children learning, growing, and trying to make sense of the world around them. Behaviors that seem challenging are often a child’s way of communicating unmet needs, big emotions, or confusion. When we respond with patience, empathy, and guidance, we help children feel understood and supported. Every child has the potential to learn, adapt, and thrive when given the right environment and care. Remember, it’s the guidance and connection we provide, not punishment or labeling, that shapes healthy development. By seeing the child behind the behavior, we create opportunities for growth and resilience” (BUM 2025). What would the world look like if we all treated each other in this manner? Linear time is a colonial construct, and development is actually fluid and recursive. The concept of adulthood or maturity as some fixed attainable milestone is a colonial construct, and so is our idea of childhood. In many ways, we are all children developing along our unique timelines based on the life chances and opportunities for growth an individual has had, meaning healing can be possible at any time given the right opportunities and environment.

Autism and narcissism can sometimes look superficially similar: both may involve difficulties with social reciprocity, unusual communication patterns, or an intense self-focus. But the underlying dynamics are very different. Autism stems from neurodevelopmental differences that affect sensory processing, social cognition, and communication, often paired with a genuine desire for connection that can be misread. Narcissism, by contrast, is a personality structure rooted in defense mechanisms, often developed to protect a fragile sense of self through strategies like grandiosity, entitlement, or manipulation. Where autistic traits reflect difference in perception and processing, narcissistic traits reflect a relational strategy for control and validation. The parallel lies in how both can be misunderstood as “lack of empathy,” yet the distinction is that autistic empathy is often present but expressed differently, while narcissistic empathy is more selectively withheld to preserve self-image.

More and more mental health professionals becoming trauma informed are realizing the same truth at once: that psychopathology may have genetic components but ultimately these traits are features of their environment, and relate to trauma and milestones that may have been missed due to ruptures in attachment during formative periods of development during childhood. Recent writings about human development reference it being fluid and recursive (Autistic Standpoint Theory, 2025) which opposes and expands modern linear (Freudian based) psychological models of child and human development. Complex trauma challenges biomedical and linear psychological models because the body/mind connection is holding trauma from the past and reenacting it unconsciously in the present moment, and many practitioners are challenging the idea of psychopathology entirely, insisting there is no narcissist, merely people mirroring each other's unhealed attachment wounds (in other words, C-PTSD) from childhood. Dr. Elizabeth Rose Halligan has stated that narcissism as opposed to pathology is simply a normal evolutionary stage of brain development, that can be understood as "brains that were not healthily mirrored in early identity development, brains with limited recursive integration across regions, and brains that remain amygdala-dominant, stuck in survival mode" (Halligan, 2025). She further states "this reframing explains so much about our current cultural movement: the self-sabotage, the refusal of facts, the rage at mirrors that reflect reality back to us. It's not just stubbornness. It's literally evolutionary neurology. And until brain and trauma integration happens, both individually and collectively, the cycle repeats." To create a better society and a more empathetic and caring world we have a moral imperative then to repent each other's unhealed parts, and help walk each other home to ourselves.

C-PTSD is essentially repeated experiences of extreme hopelessness and terrifying feelings of loss of control, which is also how top-down hierarchical systems of authority are inherently traumatizing to human attachment, as Ainsworth proved in Strange Situation. C-PTSD or relational trauma is not currently included in the DSM, though more and more mental health professionals are understanding mental health symptoms as being rooted in relational and complex trauma. Shrive and Dr. Taylor (ITIM, 2023) recently wrote a trauma informed guide to mental health as a non-diagnostic alternative to other manuals of mental health

issues and psychiatric disorders such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). W.R.D. Fairbairn, a Scottish psychoanalyst, proposed that human beings are primarily object-seeking (relationship-seeking) rather than pleasure-seeking. He argued that the fundamental motivation for human behavior is the formation of relationships, and that psychopathology arises from disturbances in these early relational experiences, particularly when a child's needs for attachment and connection are not adequately met. This model, therefore, conceptualizes psychopathology as rooted in early relational trauma, dissociation, and developmental arrest (Object Relations Institute 2025); he reconceptualizes borderline, narcissistic, and schizoid conditions as developmental disorders of the self. Dr. David Celani endorses Fairbairn's object relations model, which departs from classical drive theory and instead conceptualizes psychopathology as rooted in early relational trauma, dissociation, and developmental arrest (Object Relations Institute 2025); he reconceptualizes borderline, narcissistic, and schizoid conditions as developmental disorders of the self. Janae Elisabeth states "NPD is a form of C-PTSD. Narcissistic behaviors can often conceal other forms of neurodivergence. Most people who learned to use narcissistic strategies to feel safe are themselves Autistic, ADHD, or some other form of sensitive neurotype. People who are not as neurally sensitive don't experience such severe reactions to lack of control. A common core wound in this trauma pattern is experiencing emotional abandonment throughout childhood while having external needs abundantly met. Sensitive ND children who have everything they need EXCEPT emotional connection and co-regulation tend to develop either BPD or NPD depending on their socialization and predisposition.

Imagine a child growing up in a wealthy household where every material need such as clothes, toys, education, and vacations is provided, but the parents are emotionally distant, dismissive, or volatile. A highly sensitive child who longs for warmth and attunement feels unseen and alone despite the abundance around them. One sibling, more inwardly oriented, may grow up developing borderline traits, swinging between desperate clinging and rage when fearing abandonment. Another, socialized to prize strength and independence, may develop narcissistic defenses, masking their own vulnerability with confidence, control, and superiority. Both patterns trace back to the same wound of being

emotionally abandoned and neglected in plain sight. People with NPD CAN heal if they are supported enough to learn how to use other strategies for building safety in their nervous system. "Nothing about us without us" applies to people with NPD as much as any other form of neurodivergence." Janae Elisabeth (2025) is publishing their book "The Nervous System Study Guide," currently being distributed one chapter at a time as they write it.

Western psychiatry and its categorical Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) shaped the dominant narrative around emotionally distressed behavior by pathologizing trauma as deficit and disorder. This, combined with culturally sanctioned intolerance and "othering" shaped by authoritarian "power over" parenting practices, sets the stage for facism; Ainsworth's study through an intersectional lens exposes forced emotional detachment as the foundation that the master's house is built on. The hippie free love movement and counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s with its ideals of peace, love, harmony, autonomy and freedom led to a rejection of traditional ideals and the embracing of fluidity among relationships along with rejection of restrictive values led to the broad countercultural shift where developmental psychology embraced instinct based theories on attachment led by Bowlby and Ainsworth in the late 70s. They established the importance of healthy emotional development in children, and Ainsworth provided a critical cross-cultural record of comparison that exposes rigid, authoritarian parenting as an ethnocentric tool of state sanctioned violence and oppression against its own citizens.

As a critical object and cultural artifact, Ainsworth's study inadvertently described the United States committing crimes against humanity through the normalization of attachment trauma and pathologizing of distress to attachment ruptures as a state tool to gain and maintain control coercively. Neuroscience and anthropology have both shown that humans are either cooperative or competitive depending on the social context and what the system rewards, and seeing behavior as who a person is (individual identity) as opposed to nervous system function and behavior communication is a systemic feature of capitalism. In contrast to the social engineering and coercive authoritarian agendas in the US, Denmark's decision in 1993 to teach empathy as a required topic to schoolchildren and prioritize emotional safety has helped to reshape

Denmark into one of the world's kindest and most compassionate societies. There is empirical evidence that empathy training in schooling can produce beneficial micro-level effects. For instance, a University of Cambridge study found that a term-long empathy curriculum implemented across six countries measurably improved classroom behavior, emotional awareness, and curiosity about other cultures within about ten weeks (University of Cambridge, 2020). Similarly, a recent study published in ScienceDirect reported that an "empathy education programme" enhanced communication skills, with these improvements persisting at a four-week follow-up (Woolley et al., 2025). Broader reviews of empathy education and social-emotional learning also demonstrate consistent links between empathy, prosocial responding, stronger peer relationships, reduced externalizing behaviors, and lower aggression (Penn State Global, n.d.). Collectively, these findings suggest that structured empathy education can cultivate more supportive and cooperative classroom environments, even if evidence for large-scale societal transformation remains limited in study.

R.J. Rummel (1994), a political scientist, coined the term "Democide" to describe the murder of any person or people by their own government. Traditional Western parenting methods are a form of democide, and the United States' "death by a thousand cuts," or a situation where many small negative events gradually lead to a much larger outcome. But this democide death is preventable: the tools that dismantle the master's house are changing how we understand behavior not as dysfunction, but as communication, which allows us to respond with empathy and understanding instead of fear. For instance, aggression is often a nervous system's way of coping with anxiety or difficulties regulating emotionally. And yelling is a sign of overwhelm. This behavioral insight linking the past experiences to the present moment through the nervous system creates an opportunity to respond with empathy rather than react, with care and compassion instead of judgment or condemnation, and to connect before correction. Emotional co-regulating of our collective nervous system via each other is a social justice issue because colonial top-down authoritarian power structures attack the ways we relate to each other and are fundamentally dysregulating. Imperial systems weaponize dysregulation to limit citizens' executive functioning skills, life chances and freedom.

sensory processing

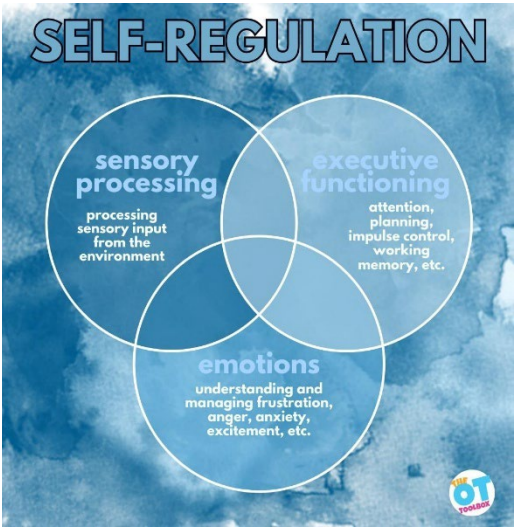
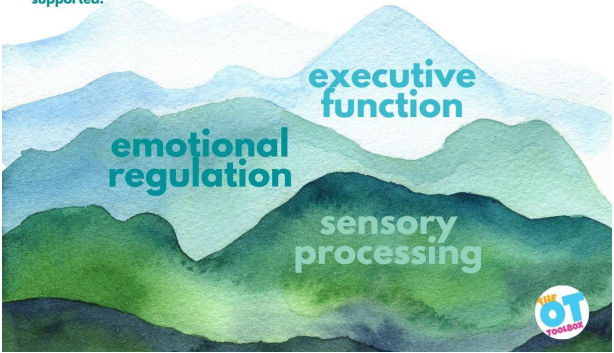
The dark greens and rougher textures to show that when sensory input is jumbled or too intense, it can feel overwhelming, like navigating a thick forest without a clear path.

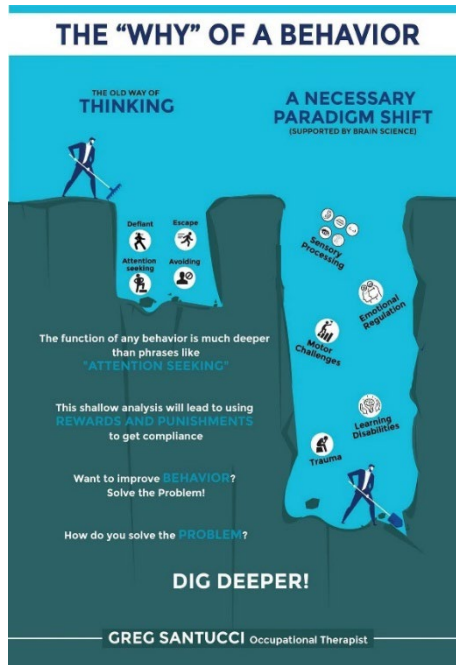
emotional regulation

These mid-range hills reflect how emotional states can rise and fall, and how they are shaped by what lies beneath (the sensory base). You might describe this layer as “shifting with the weather”, just like emotions shift depending on sensory input and situational demands.

executive function

These peaks are calm and distant, they show what’s possible when the layers underneath are in balance. Kids can access executive skills more reliably when emotions are managed and sensory systems are supported.





Emotional regulation is a (working) class issue and a human rights issue because a nervous system that is stuck in survival mode can't regulate itself, while capitalism manufactures false scarcity and poverty in order to justify its existence. In order for emotional self-regulation, a learned skill, to occur, conditions must create an environment that feels safe for the nervous system to connect. Dr. Gabor Mate (2022) has said that "safety is not the absence of threat; it is the presence of connection." Colonialism steals safety, belonging and our ability to co-regulate with each other, and replaces our relational scaffolding with a framework of separate identity, competition, scarcity and domination which dysregulates our nervous systems and fractures our psyches. This means holding space for each other's emotions and "messy" states without pulling away or withholding our support. What this looks like is learning how to stay regulated when others are distressed and lending them our calm instead of joining in the chaos. This makes parenting practices and the ways we relate to each other and show up for each other inherently political and an issue of human rights. By focusing on the damage done to Western

relational practices and social-emotional skills and norms, we can name “the enemy within ourselves” (Moraga, 1981) and also establish a common denominator or shared trait among all intersectional social justice issues, mobilizing upward beyond simply ranking our oppressions to addressing the root cause of a fractured relational culture. This awareness provides a clear path to cultural healing through relational repair and social cohesion which can help us to reestablish our collective identity.

The *Strange Situation* endures not because it measures attachment accurately but because it reveals the colonial rupture at the heart of Western identity. It is both symptom and diagnosis. The experiment’s inability to generalize across cultures is the evidence of empire’s failure to universalize its emotional template. Ainsworth’s data, reinterpreted through Fanon, Lorde, Moraga, and Spade, show that secure attachment is not merely a psychological goal but a political act.

Healing the colonized nervous system requires reparenting the world. We must co-regulate our species back into relational awareness by treating behavior as communication, empathy as praxis, and connection as liberation. The future of social justice begins where attachment ruptures end. When we restore belonging, we dismantle the matrix of colonial occupation from within.



Avoidant Attachment: Neurotypical Social Skills, Systems and Governance are Rooted in Relational Disconnection and Trauma-based Cultural Norms

Abstract

Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation experiment has long been a cornerstone of attachment theory, but its cross-cultural findings reveal more than infant behavior; they reflect the cultural shaping of relational norms rooted in emotional disconnection and pathological avoidance. American infants often displayed avoidant behaviors that contrasted with Ugandan infants' biologically expected protests, suggesting that Western norms cultivate suppression of distress and premature independence. This essay argues that avoidant attachment behaviors have scaled into cultural norms and social policies that privilege mistrust, moralizing, and emotional distance. Drawing on Bowlby's foundational work, Durkheim's theory of social integration and anomie, Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory, Gabor Maté's insights into trauma, the Functional Conflict Perspective, and Michel Foucault's analysis of power, this analysis demonstrates how early relational avoidance has been institutionalized into political governance. The result is a society that confuses detachment with strength, embeds suspicion into law and policy, and perpetuates systemic disconnection as a mode of social order.

Introduction

Avoidant attachment, when scaled into cultural norms, constrains the capacity to extend grace or assume the best in others. By defaulting to mistrust and emotional distance, the avoidant stance treats vulnerability as threat and interprets closeness as intrusion. This orientation fosters a fixed mindset where others are assumed unreliable, relationships are viewed through suspicion, and behaviors are moralized as either acceptable or dangerous rather than seen in their complexity. In this way,

avoidance forecloses the possibility of growth or change, both personally and collectively, because it denies the relational space in which people can stumble, repair, and evolve. Grace requires a willingness to risk disappointment, to trust that others are capable of goodness even when imperfect. But avoidance, rooted in self-protection, resists this risk. As a result, communities governed by avoidant norms remain locked in cycles of defensiveness and fragmentation, unable to imagine or embody the transformative potential of mutual trust.

Attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby (1969/1982), posits that early caregiving relationships shape patterns of closeness, trust, and emotional regulation throughout life. Mary Ainsworth's experimental work extended this theory into empirical observation, demonstrating that infants' responses to separation and reunion reflect learned strategies for survival in their relational environments (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). While often studied at the individual level, attachment strategies can also be understood as cultural and political phenomena. When specific attachment styles become normative, they inform the very structure of social norms, institutions, and governance.

Avoidant Attachment as Cultural Pedagogy

In Uganda, Ainsworth (1967) observed infants responding vigorously to maternal separation, signaling biologically expected attachment behaviors. By contrast, American infants often showed muted responses, appearing detached in ways that required experimenters to increase stressors to elicit protest (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This was not greater maturity but a learned suppression of distress, reflecting a cultural pedagogy of independence, emotional self-containment, and relational withdrawal. In effect, avoidance became a trained norm, embedded in early caregiving practices that reward premature self-soothing and discourage visible vulnerability.

Cultural Manifestations of Avoidance

What emerges in childhood becomes woven into society. Avoidant tendencies such as keeping others at a distance, mistrusting intimacy, moralizing behavior, and assuming betrayal as the default become cultural scripts. Popular sayings such as "protect your energy" "choose your friends carefully" or "don't let people get too close" reflect avoidant

assumptions institutionalized as “common sense.” In neurobiological terms, these strategies mirror dorsal vagal shutdown described in Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011), where safety is sought through detachment rather than connection. While adaptive in environments of emotional neglect, such strategies at the cultural level foster dominance and social control, entitlement, narcissism and self-centeredness, chronic mistrust and relational fragility.

From Social Norms to Public Policy

The American political system mirrors these avoidant logics. Social welfare programs are moralized through suspicion of “deservingness,” reflecting a cultural bias toward mistrust rather than relational care. Citizens are held at bureaucratic distance, required to prove worthiness through invasive oversight. Policies emphasize deterrence and punishment over support, echoing the avoidant infant’s strategy of suppressing bids for closeness to avoid further rejection. Maté (2003, 2010) has argued that societies built on trauma perpetuate disconnection at systemic levels, confusing detachment with resilience while pathologizing vulnerability. In this sense, governance becomes a scaled-up Strange Situation where institutions turn away from their citizens’ distress, forcing individuals to regulate alone.

Avoidance, Anomie, and Social Integration

Durkheim (1897/1951) argued that human well-being depends on integration into social life, with anomie emerging when individuals are disconnected from meaningful social bonds. Avoidant attachment as a cultural template undermines integration by normalizing emotional withdrawal and mistrust. Instead of fostering solidarity, society enshrines suspicion: neighbors become competitors, welfare recipients become “frauds,” and political governance is designed around policing rather than mutual care. The result is systemic anomie and an institutionalization of the very detachment first visible in Ainsworth’s American infants.

Avoidant Governance Through the Lens of Functional Conflict Perspective

Avoidant social norms benefit a colonial society that relies on isolationism and individualism to function. The Functional Conflict

Perspective (FCP) also reframes social conflict as a mechanism of regulation and potential healing rather than mere dysfunction. From this lens, avoidant attachment does not simply destabilize society, it actually stabilizes it through disconnection. By embedding suspicion and distance into relationships and policies, governance applies covert social controls to increase conformity and groupthink, which reduces overt conflict at the cost of long-term cohesion. Avoidant governance “works” insofar as it keeps systems orderly, but it does so by silencing distress and fragmenting relational bonds.

This mirrors avoidant strategies at the interpersonal level: temporary calm is achieved through withdrawal, yet unresolved fear and longing accumulate beneath the surface. In political life, this manifests as bureaucratic coldness, punitive social policies, and polarized distrust across communities. FCP highlights that such avoidance is both functional (maintaining surface stability) and dysfunctional (perpetuating trauma and anomie). Sustainable transformation would require a shift from avoidant logics to trauma-informed governance that integrates vulnerability into the fabric of law and policy. Only then can conflict be processed rather than suppressed, and collective healing become possible.

Foucault and the Disciplinary Logic of Avoidance

Michel Foucault’s work on disciplinary power provides a critical lens for understanding avoidant governance. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argued that modern institutions exercise power not through overt violence but through subtle mechanisms of surveillance, categorization, and normalization. Avoidant governance functions in this mode: policies and bureaucracies enforce emotional distance under the guise of neutrality. The very absence of relational engagement becomes a tool of control, as citizens internalize suspicion and regulate themselves in accordance with avoidant norms.

Similarly, Foucault’s concept of biopolitics (1978/1990) highlights how states manage populations through the regulation of life itself. By moralizing welfare, policing vulnerability, and pathologizing dependency, the American state reflects an avoidant attachment logic that converts relational disconnection into administrative efficiency. Avoidance is thus not just a personal adaptation or a cultural norm, it becomes a

disciplinary strategy of governance, embedding trauma responses into the structures of law and policy.

Cross-Comparison

When viewed together, communication patterns among neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals closely parallel avoidant and anxious attachment strategies. Neurotypical norms tend to be indirect and implied, with small talk expected as a marker of belonging, while neurodivergent norms lean toward directness, explicitness, and a preference for clarity. This mirrors avoidant attachment, which withdraws, suppresses, and avoids emotional talk, in contrast to anxious attachment, which amplifies, pursues, and often over-communicates to gain reassurance. Emotional expression follows the same logic: neurotypicals moderate their effect to fit context, valuing what is deemed “appropriate,” while neurodivergent often express authenticity, even when intense or atypical. Again, avoidance aligns with suppression and numbness, while anxious strategies heighten and dramatize distress. In terms of closeness and belonging, neurotypical life is organized through conformity, etiquette, and subtlety, reflecting avoidant discomfort with intimacy and a preference for independence. By contrast, neurodivergent belonging arises from honesty, shared passions, and explicit negotiation, echoing the anxious craving for closeness and fear of abandonment. Conflict handling continues the pattern: neurotypicals, like avoidant individuals, smooth over difficulties with politeness or disengagement, while neurodivergent, like anxiously attached individuals, address conflict directly and with emotional intensity. These divergent strategies also shape self–other views: neurotypicals evaluate the self as skilled if conforming and others through adherence to etiquette, paralleling the avoidant’s positive self and distrust of others. Neurodivergent value authenticity in the self and honesty in others, aligning with the anxious individual’s vulnerable self-concept but deep reliance on relationships. In synthesis, avoidant and neurotypical norms both prize distance, subtlety, self-sufficiency, and suppression of affect, while anxious and neurodivergent norms both value closeness, authenticity, directness, and emotional intensity. The tension cycle that results is similar in both interpersonal and cultural domains: just as avoidant and anxious partners trigger each other in relationships, neurotypical and neurodivergent norms frequently misfire,

with each side interpreting the other’s signals through its own lens, creating chronic misunderstanding and the double empathy problem.

**Cross-Comparison Matrix:
Neurotypical/Neurodivergent Norms vs. Avoidant/Anxious Attachment**

	Neurotypical	Neurodivergent
Avoidant	Suppress, smooth, conform (implicit cues, distance, etiquette)	Express, confront, connect (authenticity, directness, intensity)
Anxious	Suppress, smooth, conform (self-sufficient, avoids closeness)	Express, confront, connect (seeks closeness, fears abandonment)

- Neurotypical ↔ Avoidant = suppress, smooth, conform.
- Neurodivergent ↔ Anxious = express, confront, connect.

Secure Attachment as Relational Balance

Where avoidant and anxious patterns represent polarities of suppression and amplification, secure attachment integrates both autonomy and connection. A securely attached person approaches relationships with a baseline expectation of trust, reciprocity, and repair. Communication tends to be open and flexible, not over-explaining out of fear, nor withdrawing to protect the self, but engaging directly while attuning to the other’s needs. Emotional expression is balanced, authentic yet regulated, allowing feelings to be shared without overwhelming or stifling the relationship. Secure individuals value closeness without fearing engulfment and embrace independence without fearing abandonment. Conflict is seen not as a threat to the bond but as an opportunity for growth; disagreements are navigated with curiosity, empathy, and confidence in the possibility of repair. In terms of self–other perception, the securely attached person carries a positive view of self and others, assuming the best while remaining realistic about human imperfection.

Secure Governance as a Social Model

Extrapolating secure attachment to governance reveals a radically different structure than that produced by avoidant norms. Instead of building policies on suspicion, deterrence, and emotional distance, secure governance would prioritize trust, transparency, and relational repair. Welfare programs, for example, would not begin with the presumption of fraud but with the assumption of dignity and shared responsibility. Justice systems would shift from punitive retribution to restorative practices, viewing conflict as an opportunity for collective learning rather than simple control. Secure governance would also reframe vulnerability: rather than treating need as weakness, it would recognize interdependence as the foundation of resilience. In education, secure norms would privilege curiosity and emotional safety over performance and conformity. In public health, policies would emphasize relational support and collective care, acknowledging, as Polyvagal Theory and The Collective Nervous System suggest, that nervous system regulation is a shared, not individual, endeavor (Porges, 2011; Snow, 2025).

In short, secure governance embodies the same qualities as a secure relationship: openness, balance, flexibility, and trust in continuity and repair. Where avoidant governance suppresses vulnerability and anxious governance over-activates it, secure governance integrates both independence and interdependence into a cohesive system. Such a model does not erase conflict or vulnerability, but recognizes them as essential ingredients in building durable bonds, whether between two people or among citizens and their state.

Conclusion

Attachment theory reveals not only how individuals relate to caregivers, but also how cultures relate to their citizens. Avoidant attachment, cultivated through early suppression of vulnerability, has become a cultural template in American society and shapes the ways that we think, feel and act. From the Strange Situation's muted infant protests to public policies steeped in suspicion, the same logic recurs: closeness is unsafe, distance is protective, and vulnerability must be suppressed. Integrating insights from Bowlby, Ainsworth, Porges, Maté, Durkheim, Foucault, and the Functional Conflict Perspective demonstrates how attachment

avoidance is not merely a psychological adaptation but a political structure. To move beyond systemic disconnection, governance must adopt trauma-informed and relational models that recognize vulnerability not as weakness, but as the foundation of trust and social cohesion.

Imagining governance and relationships modeled on secure attachment reveals the transformative potential of shifting away from avoidance and amplification toward balance. Secure governance, like a secure relationship, would rest on trust, reciprocity, and the expectation of repair, treating conflict not as rupture but as an opportunity for growth. In such a system, vulnerability would no longer be pathologized or punished, but honored as the basis of connection. Applied to the Double Empathy Problem (Milton), this shift would soften the dialectics between neurotypical and neurodivergent worlds: instead of avoidance misreading authenticity as excess or authenticity misreading avoidance as coldness, secure norms would create a middle ground where directness and subtlety, intensity and regulation, can coexist without threat. Secure governance would therefore reframe misunderstanding not as failure but as a natural divergence to be bridged through curiosity and repair. In this way, the very dynamics that once produced alienation could become generative sites of mutual recognition, allowing both individuals and institutions to grow beyond fixed defensive logics into relational systems of trust, adaptability, and shared flourishing.

Pew Research Center Statistics Consistent with Generational Trauma

The Pew Research Center defines and characterizes different generations by setting clear birth year ranges, allowing researchers to track shared experiences, attitudes, and behaviors across distinct age cohorts. They define and characterize different generations by applying generational labels only when the data suggest it will illuminate important shifts in attitudes or behaviors, rather than making all-encompassing default categorizations (Parker, K., 2023). They define and characterize different generations with a critical eye, highlighting them as useful analytical lenses shaped by shared societal experiences, while warning that such labels are imprecise, potentially stereotype-laden, and overshadow the personal changes that occur over time (Dimock, M., 2023). According to the Pew Center, because I am 45 years old I belong to the Gen X cohort, ages 34-49. I was born in 1979. The Baby Boomers cohort are identified as belonging to the years 1946–1964, Generation X as the years 1965–1980, and Millennials (Gen Y) are associated with the years 1981–1996. Pew's cohort patterns can contextualize relational climates (divorce rates, living arrangements, attitudes) that plausibly shape Gen X's attachment styles and outlook.

In between the Baby Boomers before, and the Millennials after, the Gen X'ers fall in the middle among many other demographics as well, such as % married at ages 18-32, % with high school diploma or less at ages 25-32, % unaffiliated with religion, with social and political attitudes also falling in between the two extremes (Taylor, P., & Gao, G., 2014). Gen X is significantly smaller than their surrounding cohorts in part due to their parents' low fertility rates, and also due to the cohort only spanning 16 years while most generations span 20. As a cultural artifact and critical object, Gen X is a fascinating example of how cultural concepts such as generational boundaries are arbitrary and socially manufactured. The Pew Research Center defines and characterizes Generation X as the often-overlooked 'middle child' positioned demographically and ideologically between Baby Boomers and Millennials, marked by its members' pragmatic realism, weaker generational identity, and

underrepresentation in media and cultural narratives. “they’re savvy, skeptical and self-reliant; they’re not into preening or pampering, and they just might not give much of a hoot what others think of them. Or whether others think of them at all” (Taylor, P., & Gao, G., 2014).

Most of the data, research, and analysis the Pew Research Center provides as a nonpartisan, nonprofit research gathering fact tank based in Washington, D.C. centers around US politics and policy. The article Boomers, Silents still have most seats in Congress, though number of Millennials, Gen Xers is up slightly is an example of how Gen X tends to be more moderate politically (Blazina, C., & DeSilver, D., 2021). Their articles in the Gen X section mostly include titles focusing on Millennials, which is a direct and somewhat ironic example of this cohort’s underrepresentation in the media. Their articles with Gen X in the title such as Millennials aren’t job-hopping any faster than Generation X did (Fry, 2017a) and Gen Zers, Millennials and Gen Xers outvoted Boomers and older generations in 2016 election (Fry, 2017c) tend to use the cohort as contrast against others, as opposed to addressing the Gen X cohort individually, unlike many of the articles on Millennials. This made it a bit of a challenge to identify characteristics unique to Gen X’s early life course, though statistics like only 10% of young adults in the cohort remaining at home (Fry, 2017b) indicate strained attachment relationships with parents following teenage years. This lack of closeness and connection with parental figures may account for the self-reliance, lack of identity, pragmatism, skepticism, and general emotional detachment and avoidant attitudes that the Pew identifies as traits of this cohort. Because there is a link between substance abuse and attachment disorders in medical and academic literature, the increasing support for the legalization of marijuana among this cohort and others could also possibly intersect with the relational trauma that this cohort may have experienced during adolescence with its early attachment figures, intersecting with the low number of Gen X remaining in intergenerational housing beyond high school (Geiger, 2016) despite a record 64 million Americans living in multigenerational households (Cohn, D., & Passel, J. S., 2018). Baby boomers, the parents of Gen X, lead the climb in divorce rates (Steppler, R., 2017), which is also strongly indicative of the parents of Gen X having disrupted or disorganized attachment and unhealed trauma themselves.

54% of Gen X favored legalizing marijuana in 2013, up from 28% in 1994 (and ~42% by 2004) (Pew Research Center., 2013), with Pew reporting that only 36% of Gen X said marijuana leads to hard drugs, significantly lower than the other cohorts. I can definitely relate to the hyper independence, self-reliance, general mistrust, skepticism, and critical attitudes that are attributed to the Gen X cohort. I was thrust into adulthood early due to being raised by parents who struggled with chronic stress, and that forced maturity resulted in a loss of playfulness and autonomy in early development. This was a common experience for my generational cohort. Attachment trauma significantly impacts the ways that we perceive the world and respond to it, and given my home of origin, it's not surprising that I have become jaded and mistrustful as an adult. My relationship with my parents was strained into my teens, when I was kicked out of my home 8 times beginning when I was 12 years old. My perception of who I can trust was shaped by those experiences, and obviously intergenerational/extended living at home into adulthood was never an option, placing me among the majority of other Gen Xers.

The Gen X group was the harshest on their judgments of youth in a Pew overview on the generation gap, which may indicate how they were viewed and treated as children themselves (Taylor, P., & Morin, R., 2009). Boomers were most likely to say there's less conflict now, which may be evidence of "rosy retrospection", a proposed psychological phenomenon of recalling the past more positively than it was actually experienced. This phenomenon's purpose is in increasing self-esteem and sense of well-being when past actions conflict with the ego's self-identification, and may account for the disparities in accounts of historical narratives between generations. Despite their more positive outlook on youth today, Boomers are an incredibly unhappy cohort (Cohn, D. 2008), rating their quality of life as significantly lower than other generations, and this emotional distress could coincide with more authoritarian parenting styles that in turn impact relational difficulties and created problems with attachment between the parent generation the Boomers and their Gen X children.

Overall, I believe that the Pew's data accurately reflects my own personal experiences as a member of the Gen X generational cohort, but I also feel that more attention needs to be paid to the intersections between personal attitudes and relational trends, particularly in regards to the

ways that our parenting norms, relationships and the social landscape experienced during childhood map the developing individual mindset, and how that mindset in turn may be responsible for shaping the personal and political choices and beliefs of entire generations. Pew's generational trends map the social ecology Gen X matured within (rising divorce, cohort-distinct living patterns, attitude shifts). When triangulated with attachment and family-process research, these trends are consistent with cohort-level exposure to relational stressors that may foster the pragmatic, self-reliant profile that the Pew Research Center has ascribed to Gen X. The statistics provided on the Pew website are evidence of how avoidant attachment styles occur due to a pattern of rupture within our childhood relationships, and how these avoidant behaviors can be normalized within a generational cohort.

“Attachment experiences exert a profound influence on the maturation of limbic regions, including the amygdala, hippocampus, and anterior cingulate cortex—areas crucial for emotional regulation, stress reactivity, and interpersonal attunement.”

— Teicher, M. H., & Samson, J. A. (2016). *The effects of childhood maltreatment on brain structure, function and connectivity*. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 17(10), 652–666.

The Western Expression of Inside Sickness

Introduction: From Mai Na Loko to the Western Body

In Hawaiian epistemology, the phrase Mai Na Loko, meaning “inside sickness,” expresses the belief that unresolved emotional wounds, especially those born of family conflict or betrayal, can manifest as physical illness. This principle is not metaphorical but diagnostic, describing an integrated worldview in which body, mind, and relationship form a single field of health.

This understanding of suffering as both relational and somatic finds remarkable resonance in contemporary trauma science. Stephen Porges’ Polyvagal Theory explains how the autonomic nervous system encodes safety and danger in the body’s physiology, shaping our capacity for connection, trust, and regulation. Similarly, Bessel van der Kolk’s landmark work *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) demonstrates that unprocessed trauma is stored not only in memory but in muscle tension, immune function, and visceral patterns of defense. Together, these frameworks affirm what Hawaiian knowledge has long known: that emotional injury becomes biological memory, and that healing requires restoring relational safety within and around the body. In this synthesis, Mai Na Loko is not merely a poetic metaphor for illness but an Indigenous articulation of the same principle that modern neuroscience now names, the body keeps what the heart cannot release. Prior to a traumatic event, the brain will perceive certain stimuli, contexts, situations and experiences as neutral, but after something emotionally distressing and overwhelming leaves someone unable to cope on their own, they may create associations linking those things with threats and unsafety. Dysregulation is like a traffic jam in the prefrontal cortex, where nothing can get through until the roads are cleared through connection and emotional safety. Behavioral consequences and rewards are ineffective in this state.

Modern psychoneuroimmunology echoes this ancestral knowledge. Emotional pain activates cortisol dysregulation, disrupts the gut microbiota, and generates chronic inflammation (Galovski & Lyons, 2004).

When unprocessed grief and betrayal become embodied; distress literally takes root in the body. Yet Mai Na Loko points beyond physiology to relational ethics. The “sickness inside” originates from fractures in relationships, not from weakness of character. Healing begins through reconnection to oneself, to others, and to the collective body.

This Indigenous insight provides a powerful comparative frame for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Western military and civilian contexts. Rather than a universal neurological disorder, PTSD can be interpreted as a culture-bound syndrome that arises from a society lacking both the language and the ritual necessary to metabolize grief, shame, and moral injury.

II. Empirical Foundations: PTSD, Secondary Trauma, and the Family System

1. Secondary Traumatization and Family Systemic Stress

Research on combat-related PTSD demonstrates that trauma extends far beyond the individual veteran and infiltrates the relational ecology of the household. Early work by Cosgrove, Brady, and Peck (1995) and Davidson and Connor (1999) identified families as secondary sites of combat stress where rage, avoidance, and hypervigilance reverberate among spouses and children. Later empirical studies by Ahmadi et al. (2011) and Bjornestad et al. (2014) confirmed that partners of veterans frequently develop secondary traumatic stress (STS) that mirrors primary PTSD. Gilbert (1997) reframed this as systemic burnout, emphasizing that chronic caregiving within emotionally dysregulated environments produces exhaustion and guilt rather than resilience. Together these findings portray PTSD not as an isolated psychiatric entity but as a family-system condition and psychic entity maintained through group coregulation, shared emotional dysregulation and shared physiological arousal.

2. Mechanisms of Transmission: Emotional Contagion, Moral Injury, and Role Strain

Scholars have since clarified how trauma propagates through empathic resonance and social learning. Galovski and Lyons (2004) and Dekel and Monson (2010) observed that combat stress undermines communication and intimacy, calling for conjoint therapy models that treat

relational repair as essential to recovery. Nash and Litz (2013) introduced moral injury, the internalized violation of moral values, as a mechanism that extends trauma to families through shame and alienation. Olson et al. (2018) identified family cohesion and community integration as major buffers against this cycle, while Hinton et al. (2009) showed that familial disruption among Cambodian refugees mirror Western PTSD patterns yet remain embedded in distinct cultural idioms. These cross-cultural insights confirm that trauma is linguistically and relationally mediated. The words and rituals a culture provides determine whether distress is released or internalized as “inside sickness.”

My own experience with PTSD mirrored this framework in painfully literal ways. For years, I lacked the language to describe what I was feeling. Without words to name my emotional pain, those feelings became trapped inside, turning inward as physiological distress that manifested as maladaptive and dysfunctional behaviors. My nervous system remained in a constant state of survival, guided more by my amygdala than my prefrontal cortex. Instead of being able to make calm, conscious decisions, I reacted reflexively, driven by fight-or-flight responses that kept me in a loop of hypervigilance and exhaustion. The absence of language created a kind of internal silence, a *Mai Na Loko* where emotion could not move, only accumulate. In hindsight, I understand this as the nervous system’s attempt to protect me, yet that protection became its own form of imprisonment. Healing began only when I could translate physical sensation into meaning and understanding, giving words to what my body had been carrying all along.

3. Intergenerational and Systemic Effects

Trauma’s influence also extends across generations. Zalihić et al. (2008) and Greene, Lahav, and Bronstein (2014) demonstrated that children and spouses of veterans manifest physiological and emotional symptoms proportional to the parent’s PTSD severity. Matsakis (2013) and McGaw, Reupert, and Maybery (2019) documented role reversal, guilt, and helplessness as learned familial responses, while Senior, Clarke, and Wilson-Menzfeld (2023) highlighted elevated rates of intimate-partner violence and secondary PTSD among spouses. Collectively, these studies depict PTSD as a multigenerational communicable

disorder transmitted through attachment, behavior, and epigenetic change.

4. Pathways to Healing: Social Support and Relational Intervention

Contemporary intervention research reframes healing as a social process. Woodward et al. (2015) found that supportive relationships significantly reduce posttraumatic cognitions and symptom severity. Renshaw et al. (2011) distinguished secondary trauma from generalized distress, emphasizing chronic exposure as the key mechanism. Thompson-Hollands et al. (2021) and Ortiz (2024) demonstrated that family-inclusive treatment and peer support improve outcomes by restoring empathy and reducing isolation. Across this empirical base, a single pattern persists: connection is the antidote to contagion. The same relational pathways that transmit trauma can also transmit repair.

III. The Family as the Second Battlefield: Intergenerational Transmission and Structural Trauma

The family serves as both the vessel and the victim of the warfare frame. Emotional silence, coercive control, and chronic hyperarousal transform domestic life into a continuation of combat. Longitudinal studies, such as those by Greene et al. (2014) and McGaw et al. (2019), confirm that the veteran's trauma reorganizes family roles and nervous systems alike.

My own decade as a Navy wife illustrates this process of emotional contagion and systemic trauma. My husband and I had built what I believed was a stable life. We had three children together, and when our oldest was born, he was home for the birth. But when our baby was only a few months old, he received orders to deploy to Diego Garcia, a small atoll in the Indian Ocean that is co-managed by the United States and the United Kingdom. He was stationed there for approximately twelve months. When that deployment ended, he returned home briefly before being sent out again, this time aboard the USS Carl Vinson, an aircraft carrier deployed for about nine months. Altogether, he was gone for roughly eighteen consecutive months. During that time, I was home alone raising four children, including a newborn, managing every responsibility without emotional support. I lived with constant anxiety about his safety.

When he finally returned, he was no longer the person I remembered. He was no longer affectionate and was disconnected, emotionally detached, irritable, and frequently angry. Alcohol became his way of coping and when not at work, he spent his time playing video games or on his guitar, but never wanted to go on outings with me or the kids and had no friends or social support of his own. If I tried to take him anywhere his angry mood guaranteed I would end up regretting it, and he was miserable the entire time. Conversations turned into arguments, and arguments turned into verbal abuse. It was as if the war had followed him home and taken root in our house. The warmth that had once defined our marriage was replaced by coldness and volatility. I started joking to my friends that our marriage had become “just like the movie *War of the Roses*” (*The War of the Roses*, 1989) which was about spouses living under one roof and fighting brutally with each other, but it wasn’t so much a joke as a confession and cry for help that went unheard.

Over time, the tension became unbearable. I began to absorb his symptoms. His irritability became mine; his hopelessness became my own. I found myself reacting to his anger with anger, losing pieces of who I was. My body began to mirror the emotional decay around me, and eventually I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I have always believed that the cancer was not random. It was the physical manifestation of years of unprocessed fear, grief, and emotional suppression from my traumatic childhood, and my energy being drained from my emotionally abusive and neglectful marriage, a literal *Mai Na Loko*, an inside sickness born of silence and survival.

After years of pleading for help, I managed to convince him to see a therapist, but he refused to engage in treatment in any meaningful way. A Navy psychological evaluation later determined that he was “unfit for rehabilitation.” His behavior grew worse. He became controlling, verbally abusive, and eventually violent. When I began planning to leave, he responded with rage, sexual assault, and financial manipulation. He drained our accounts, took the children, and locked me out of the home. And while doing it, he managed to convince everyone that I was the bad guy because my mental health and psyche had crumbled after catching his PTSD he brought home from deployment and then going through chemotherapy, the associated chemically induced menopause, then hormones from a new pregnancy and chronic and prolonged stress from

grieving a mother who committed suicide, all without his presence or support (for example, he went gambling in Las Vegas when I was settling my mother's affairs) and all while he was actively abusing me then blaming me for how I reacted, and all these things happened to my brain and body in a very short amount of time.

I did do and say some things in the heat of the moment (and out of my fear for my children's and my own safety) that I now regret. But at the time, I didn't have control over my behaviors, due to a nervous system being hijacked by flooding emotions and the continued prolonged stress from his treatment of me. "Reactive abuse" is often just the nervous system finally snapping. When you've been ignored, gaslit, and invalidated so many times it's normal for the body to respond by lashing out or to react in other ways behaviorally that are completely out of character for you. That's what continued emotional neglect built up over time does to a person physically, proving an undisputable link between our body, behavior, and social climates. The creator of The Protective Parenting Program, a therapeutic evidence-based attachment focused program for parents of children harmed by abusers is Dr. Cocchiola, DSW, LCSW, who stated in a TEDx talk (2025) that a woman is safer in an alley than in her own home. Abuse is the number one killer for African American women ages 18-35, and 35% of all women suffer violence in their lifetime, but how many more are suffering from abuse that isn't violent, and that they might not even recognize as abuse, like in my situation at first? This behavior occurs due to the social and political structures in our society normalizing mistreatment. Emotional abuse, coercive control and neglect like the kind I survived is an invisible epidemic occurring under our noses because most people don't even recognize it as abuse, given that capitalist society seems to be intentionally and strategically kept in a state of permanent adolescence and emotional delay, and because the numbers on record don't match the vast majority of cases that go unreported and undocumented. Unfortunately, my older children were never able to tell the difference. Abuse is still abuse, and witnessing any form of abuse rewires the brain in the same way that war trauma does to military members.

In the aftermath of the abuse and while recovering which could only begin after he'd forced me into homelessness once I'd regained stability through housing, I came to see that what had happened was more than

just my personal tragedy. It was the embodiment of a national trauma loop. My husband had been trained to disconnect from empathy and emotion in order to perform his duties as a sailor. That disconnection did not end with his military service; it metastasized into our family system. His trauma became the family's trauma, and the violence of war was re-born inside our home. What the Navy called PTSD was, through the lens of Mai Na Loko and the Functional Conflict Perspective, a culturally sanctioned infection, a symptom of a society that glorifies emotional suppression and then pathologizes its consequences.

Within the Functional Conflict Perspective, this experience exemplifies how hierarchical institutions reproduce their emotional logic within families. The command-and-control structure that sustains military efficiency becomes pathogenic in intimate life, converting love into compliance and conversation into combat. Trauma thus operates as a functional by-product of systemic design, a mechanism through which coercive systems perpetuate themselves at the micro-level.

From the standpoint of the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), the same mechanisms that cause trauma to fragment the body also cause societies to fragment under chronic emotional repression. The nervous system is not only individual but collective, and when fear, shame, and grief are socially silenced, the entire culture develops what might be called a collective Mai Na Loko, or an inside sickness of civilization. Just as the body enters a defensive state when safety cues are absent, societies governed by domination, punishment, and competition enter a similar physiological pattern of chronic hyperarousal. This is what Porges describes as a loss of "neuroception of safety," and what van der Kolk identifies as the social consequence of unintegrated trauma. Within FCP, this becomes a sociological principle: unresolved conflict is not a flaw but a signal, a body politic's attempt to communicate distress. Healing therefore requires relational integration rather than suppression, creating conditions of emotional safety and reciprocity at every level of system, from the nervous system to the family, from the institution to the state. In this sense, the path to personal regulation and social harmony are one and the same.

IV. Restorative Cohesion: Healing the Collective Nervous System

1. The Warfare Frame and the Domestic Battlefield

Legal scholar Dean Spade (2016) describes the U.S. political order as governed by a “warfare frame,” in which the state wages continuous war on its own population through poverty, incarceration, and systemic neglect. Within this framework, militarism abroad and structural violence at home form a seamless circuit. The nation manufactures soldiers to enact violence externally, then abandons them to reenact it internally. Veterans return not merely as victims of war but as instruments of its return, carrying the empire’s trauma into their families.

2. Manufactured Victims of War

The United States produces victims of its own warfare economy. As seen in countless families, soldiers trained to suppress empathy reproduce domination in domestic form. The violence learned abroad becomes the relational grammar of home. PTSD, domestic abuse, and community disintegration are not accidental; they are systemic symptoms of a society addicted to externalized conflict.

My family’s story illustrates this recursion. A man trained to kill in the name of safety brought that war home, not in uniform but in demeanor, until emotional estrangement became our daily life. His trauma became mine, and mine became our children’s. The warfare frame ensures that war never ends; it only changes location.

3. FCP and the State as a Dysregulated Nervous System

Within the Functional Conflict Perspective, the warfare frame is interpreted as the expression of a collective nervous system trapped in chronic sympathetic activation. Like a traumatized individual oscillating between aggression and collapse, the state maintains control through coercion while suppressing grief. War, incarceration, and poverty function as the nation’s dissociative coping strategies, ways to discharge anxiety without integration. FCP reveals that these defensive mechanisms serve short-term stability but long-term pathology. The soldier who cannot cry becomes the father who cannot love, and the nation that cannot mourn becomes the empire that cannot stop killing.

4. Mirror Integration Theory and Restorative Cohesion

Through Mirror Integration Theory (MIT), these dynamics are understood as reciprocal reflections: the traumatized self and the traumatized society mirror one another. Healing requires recursive repair, a feedback process in which internal and external regulation co-evolve. Restorative Cohesion emerges as the applied framework of this integration, a social architecture that replaces control with care, punishment with restoration, and silence with dialogue. In this paradigm, governance itself becomes a therapeutic system. Policies addressing poverty, housing, and mental health are not acts of charity but of collective regulation that re-balance the social nervous system.

5. Healing the Warfare Frame

To heal the warfare frame, both individuals and institutions must practice the same principles that heal trauma: safety, connection, and meaning. On the personal level, this means cultivating emotional literacy and moral repair. On the systemic level, it means dismantling structures that sustain chronic stress, such as economic precarity, racialized violence, and punitive law. The measure of national strength must shift from domination to empathy, from GDP to collective well-being.

V. Conclusion

Across empirical research, lived experience, and cultural analysis, PTSD emerges as a Western manifestation of inside sickness, a communicable disorder of emotional repression sustained by avoidant social structures. The United States, operating within a perpetual warfare frame, continually generates victims of its own trauma response: soldiers abroad, families at home, and citizens trapped within coercive hierarchies. Healing requires a collective turn toward Restorative Cohesion, the social equivalent of nervous-system regulation. When families, institutions, and nations learn to process conflict through relationship rather than domination, the recursive loop of violence can finally be broken. As Hawaiian wisdom teaches, health begins inside, and what we heal within ourselves, we heal in the world.

If PTSD can spread through a single family system, reshaping the emotions, behaviors, and even biochemistry of its members, we must ask what happens when an entire society lives within a chronic state of unprocessed trauma. From an ecological and relational standpoint, this is

not merely a psychological question but a planetary one. According to James Lovelock's Gaia Theory (1979), Earth functions as a self-regulating organism whose biosphere, atmosphere, and living systems maintain equilibrium through continuous feedback. When humans act in ways that disrupt this balance, the planet responds in kind. Rupert Sheldrake's Morphic Field Theory (1981) extends this concept, proposing that patterns of thought and behavior resonate through collective fields, shaping what becomes possible within any given system. Likewise, Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious suggests that humanity shares a psychic substrate through which trauma, archetypes, and healing potential circulate beyond the individual mind.

When viewed together, these frameworks reveal that trauma is not confined to bodies or households but reverberates through the collective nervous system of the Earth itself. If one veteran's pain can destabilize a family, the unhealed grief of entire nations can destabilize the planet. Indigenous knowledge has always understood this reciprocity. Mai Na Loko teaches that illness within relationships manifests as illness within the body, and by extension, that illness within humanity manifests as illness within the world. The wars we wage against one another, the pollution we pour into our soil and seas, and the emotional avoidance we practice in our homes all emerge from the same fragmentation of spirit. What we do to the Earth, we do to ourselves, and what we heal within ourselves, we heal within the Earth. To restore the health of our families, our societies, and our planet, we must learn to feel again, because only through reconnection can the collective body remember its wholeness.

Literature Review: PTSD, Secondary Trauma, and the Family System

1. Introduction

The psychological and relational aftermath of war has long been studied through the lens of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Yet contemporary research increasingly reveals that PTSD is not confined to the individual veteran but extends throughout the family system, producing a cascade of secondary trauma, emotional contagion, and intergenerational transmission. The following literature examines the psychological, biological, and social mechanisms through which trauma proliferates in military families, illustrating how war's psychic residue manifests

within domestic life. Collectively, these studies challenge the individualistic framework of Western psychiatry and suggest that trauma must be understood as a relational and systemic condition.

2. Secondary Traumatization and Family Systemic Stress

Early conceptualizations of PTSD in family contexts framed trauma as a shared system phenomenon. Cosgrove, Brady, and Peck (1995) identified secondary traumatization in families as a process wherein the veteran's symptoms: anger, withdrawal, and emotional volatility destabilize the household and induce parallel suffering in spouses and children. Davidson and Connor (1999) expanded this by documenting increased psychopathology and dysregulation among family members of trauma survivors, proposing the concept of familial co-regulation, where stress responses synchronize across relational systems.

Later research empirically confirmed these early insights. Ahmadi et al. (2011) demonstrated that the severity of a veteran's PTSD directly predicts the intensity of distress among spouses, while Bjornestad et al. (2014) validated the construct of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) by adapting military PTSD assessment tools for use with partners. Gilbert (1997) reframed this phenomenon as systemic burnout, suggesting that families bear the emotional cost of caring within chronically dysregulated environments. Together, these studies established a robust foundation for understanding PTSD as a relationally transmitted disorder rather than an isolated psychiatric diagnosis.

3. Mechanisms of Transmission: Emotional Contagion, Moral Injury, and Role Strain

A central theme across the literature is that trauma spreads not through physical exposure but through empathic resonance and emotional modeling. Galovski and Lyons (2004) offered one of the most comprehensive reviews of how combat-related PTSD leads to emotional detachment, aggression, and relational breakdown. Dekel and Monson (2010) similarly found that trauma erodes communication and intimacy, arguing for conjoint family therapy to reestablish connection and trust.

Nash and Litz (2013) advanced this understanding by introducing the concept of moral injury, describing how violations of

moral and ethical frameworks in wartime generate shame, guilt, and alienation that extend to family members. These findings align with Olson et al. (2018), who identified family cohesion and community support as buffers against PTSD severity, suggesting that relational integration mitigates moral and psychological dissonance.

Studies conducted across cultures reinforce that emotional and moral contagion are universal phenomena, though expressed through different idioms. Hinton et al. (2009), studying Cambodian refugees, linked PTSD-related anger to shifting family hierarchies and cultural scripts of distress, illustrating that family systems metabolize trauma through culturally specific emotional languages. These findings resonate with Hawaiian understandings of *Mai Na Loko* (“inside sickness”) and affirm that trauma’s transmission depends not only on exposure but on the linguistic and relational ecology in which suffering is named.

4. Intergenerational and Systemic Effects

The literature further demonstrates that trauma is transmitted across generations through both biological and behavioral channels. Zalihić et al. (2008) observed that children of fathers with PTSD exhibit heightened anxiety, somatic complaints, and behavioral dysregulation, even in the absence of direct violence. Greene, Lahav, and Bronstein (2014) confirmed this intergenerational trajectory in the families of ex-prisoners of war, where spouses developed secondary trauma in proportion to their partners’ symptom severity.

Matsakis (2013) and McGaw, Reupert, and Maybery (2019) expanded this analysis to family structure, documenting role reversal, guilt, and learned helplessness as enduring legacies of trauma. These studies converge on the conclusion that PTSD reorganizes family identity, teaching emotional avoidance and vigilance as survival strategies. Senior, Clarke, and Wilson-Menzfeld (2023) further identified intimate partner violence and secondary PTSD among spouses as pervasive outcomes, underscoring the systemic nature of trauma transmission within militarized family contexts.

5. Pathways to Healing: Social Support and Relational Intervention

While the psychological literature often pathologizes trauma, a growing body of research emphasizes the restorative potential of social support. Woodward et al. (2015) found that supportive family and friendship networks significantly reduce PTSD severity and maladaptive posttraumatic cognitions. Renshaw et al. (2011) differentiated secondary trauma from general psychological distress, showing that spouses' PTSD-like symptoms are specific responses to chronic exposure to trauma behaviors, not simply stress.

Intervention-based research echoes this relational approach. Thompson-Hollands et al. (2021) demonstrated that the inclusion of family members in veterans' treatment through the Brief Family Intervention (BFI) improved empathy and treatment adherence. Ortiz (2024) similarly found that peer networks and group therapy mitigate isolation and reduce symptom intensity among military spouses. These findings collectively reinforce that connection is curative, the same mechanism through which trauma spreads is the mechanism through which it heals.

6. Synthesis and Implications

Across the empirical and theoretical literature, a coherent pattern emerges: PTSD is not an individual disorder but a family system condition. Emotional withdrawal, moral injury, and secondary trauma reverberate through intimate relationships, reshaping attachment, identity, and even physiology. Families exposed to trauma exhibit symptoms of collective dysregulation that mirror those of the affected veteran, supporting the conceptualization of PTSD as a relational and cultural pathology.

Interventions that center empathy, dialogue, and collective healing rather than isolated symptom management demonstrate the greatest long-term efficacy. These findings align with trauma-informed frameworks, Indigenous models of relational health such as *Mai Na Loko*, and systemic theories like the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), which view emotional repair as both a psychological and societal process. The literature therefore calls for a paradigmatic shift in how trauma is understood: from individual pathology to interpersonal ecology.



Triangulated Cosmology of Colonial Trauma: Connecting Three Diagnostic Mirrors

Abstract

This essay presents a unified theory of civilization through the nervous system, integrating empirical findings from Ainsworth's attachment studies, Solmi's global autism epidemiology, and Precedence Research's PTSD economics. When read together, these data sets reveal three dimensions of a single hidden structure: the emotional, linguistic, and economic machinery of colonization. The analysis deconstructs psychology, economics, and linguistics through a trauma-informed and decolonial lens, unifying biology and sociology to demonstrate that the "collective

nervous system” is not metaphorical but literal. By interpreting autism, PTSD, and trauma not as pathologies but as feedback signals from an injured collective organism, the paper reframes mental illness as a reflection of systemic disconnection.

This theoretical synthesis reverses the traditional epistemic gaze: rather than viewing the autistic or traumatized individual as an object of study, it reads civilization itself through their heightened sensory and relational intelligence. In doing so, it positions neurodivergent and trauma-informed perception as diagnostic tools for understanding the health of societies. The findings suggest that industrial civilization functions as a chronic PTSD environment, perpetuating a global “Strange Situation” in which humanity collectively reenacts its separation from relational safety symbolically, from Gaia as caregiver. The resulting framework reconceptualizes mental health, capitalism, and consciousness within a single continuum of relational trauma, shifting the question from “What is wrong with individuals?” to “What is happening to the collective/global nervous system?”

Triangulated Cartographies of Disconnection: From Maps of Disorder to Mirrors of Civilization

1. Three Maps, One Matrix

When the autism prevalence map (Solmi, 2022), the PTSD treatment market map (Precedence, 2025), and Ainsworth’s Strange Situation experiment (1969) are interpreted together, they reveal not three isolated phenomena but a continuous colonial feedback loop and an emotional, linguistic, and economic cartography of human emotional avoidance and disconnection.

Each dataset measures the same pathology from a different angle:

- Ainsworth’s experiment exposed the microbiopolitics of attachment; how Western infants are currently being conditioned to suppress distress, unintentionally reflecting state-engineered emotional repression in the U.S. by comparing them to infants with healthy attachment in Uganda.

- Solmi's map inadvertently visualized the linguistic colonization of mind; how English-speaking cultures externalize relational rupture and pathologize sensitivity.
- Precedence's map quantified the industrial commodification of suffering; how trauma becomes prevalent in the same emotionally repressed economies that coincide with Solmi's map and Ainsworth's findings.

Together, these maps form a colonial trinity of fragmentation, where colonial language and emotional avoidance severs relation, relation severs safety causing trauma and emotional avoidance, and safety is sold back as treatment for the trauma caused by avoidance and repression.

2. Ainsworth's Strange Situation as the Relational Genesis of Western Pathology

Mary Ainsworth's comparative study between Ugandan and American infants becomes the original ethnographic proof of fracture; a moment where psychology accidentally recorded the birth of Western relational trauma. In Uganda, attachment behavior emerged naturally within communal living, co-regulation, and attunement; conditions of relational safety. In Baltimore, Ainsworth had to artificially induce distress for American infants to display attachment; conditions of relational deprivation. The "Strange Situation" thus became not only an experiment but an X-ray of the Western psyche and a cultural artifact revealing the normalization of avoidant attachment, emotional detachment, and self-reliance as colonial virtues.

The American infants' indifference to separation was not evidence of resilience but of systemic emotional anesthesia and a nervous system adapted to neglect. This normalized absence of distress, replicated generation after generation through authoritarian parenting, became the foundation for industrial obedience and capitalist subject formation. In Autistic Standpoint Theory, this represents the first socially engineered disconnection between language and feeling with the infant's nervous system learning to suppress expression for survival within a coercive and oppressive social field.

3. From Strange Situation to Solmi's Map: The Linguistic Continuum of Disconnection

If Ainsworth's study shows the origin of emotional avoidance, Solmi's global autism data shows its global linguistic diffusion. The highest autism rates cluster precisely where Ainsworth's Strange Situation behaviors became normalized, in English-dominant, industrialized societies that prize hyper-autonomy, competition, and control. From the AST lens, this correlation is not coincidental, it's causal. English itself, as a language of command and categorization, encodes the very grammar of avoidance that Ainsworth observed behaviorally. Solmi's map thus reveals the linguistic descendants of the Strange Situation: a planetary population raised within speech and social systems that perpetuate the colonial nervous system as hypervocal, emotionally disconnected, and self-referential.

Autism's "rise," therefore, is not the emergence of a genetic disorder but the linguistic overactivation by egoic cognitive processes activating dormant relational, evolutionary, genetic neurotypes. As English spread through colonization, it carried with it not only vocabulary but a worldview that prioritizes I over we, and function over feeling. The map's red zones are not just regions of autism prevalence; they are regions of colonial language dominance and diagnostic hegemony, zones where the collective nervous system has been grammatically severed from relational attunement.

4. From Solmi's Map to Precedence's Market: The Capitalization of Collective Trauma

Where Solmi's map charts the linguistic colonization of the mind, Precedence's PTSD market map charts the economic colonization of the body. North America's 58% market share in trauma treatment is the financial mirror of its 600+ per 100,000 autism prevalence rate: both metrics measure the cost of relational disconnection. From an FCP perspective, these are twin expressions of the same functional conflict, capitalism as the externalized nervous system of colonial trauma.

- The state suppresses emotion → individuals develop trauma symptoms.
- Industry medicalizes trauma → sells treatments for the symptoms it manufactures.

- Language defines these reactions as “disorders” → reinforcing dependence on expert systems.

This loop forms a closed feedback circuit of disconnection, where emotional repression sustains economic growth and linguistic pathologization legitimizes hierarchy. Ainsworth’s laboratory, Solmi’s data, and Precedence’s economics are all stations in the same machinery: a global system that wages war on its own citizens and converts their unprocessed emotion into profit.

5. The Nervous System as Empire: Mai Na Loko and the Global Strange Situation

Hawaiian epistemology’s Mai Na Loko (“sickness inside”) names what all three maps describe: a civilization suffering from collective inside sickness. The Earth itself has become the ultimate “strange situation” and a planetary laboratory in which humanity reenacts Ainsworth’s paradigm of separation from its caregiver, Gaia.

When these three conditions coalesce, they reveal a single field disturbance: colonialism as a nervous system state. Industrial civilization is the dorsal vagal shutdown of the planet; disconnected, overregulated, and dissociated from empathy.

6. Gender, Care, and the Colonial Logic of Trauma

The colonial warfare frame of governance reproduces itself in family hierarchies: the command structure of the military becomes the emotional architecture of the household and the suppression of feminine-coded relational intelligence with the global undervaluation of unpaid care work (\$10.8 trillion annually) that sustains capitalist economies (Oxfam, 2025). Women and children, evolutionarily optimized for co-regulation and safety signaling, bear the heaviest physiological cost. The prevalence of relational PTSD among women is thus not incidental, it is the biological price of patriarchal colonization.

Through this lens, the Strange Situation, Solmi’s autism map, and the PTSD market all document the same moral injury: a species that has severed mutual support and collective care from social structure and systems.

7. Reintegrating the Mirror: From Anatomopolitics to Collective Healing

Foucault's concept of anatomopolitics as the state's regulation of bodies through emotional control finds its neurobiological counterpart in polyvagal theory: both describe systems organized around the suppression of vulnerability. When applied at scale, these dynamics turn entire populations into dysfunctional, maladaptive systems.

Mirror Integration Theory resolves this split by restoring reciprocity between systems:

- The family nervous system mirrors the state nervous system.
- The state nervous system mirrors the planetary field.

Healing one scale requires integrating all.

Restorative Cohesion becomes the antidote: the deliberate reconstruction of social and linguistic environments that support co-regulation rather than competition. Decolonizing the mind, then, is not only an intellectual act but a physiological one, restoring the parasympathetic pathways of belonging that colonial grammar suppressed.

8. Reading the Maps as Mirrors of One Another

Overview of Each Study:

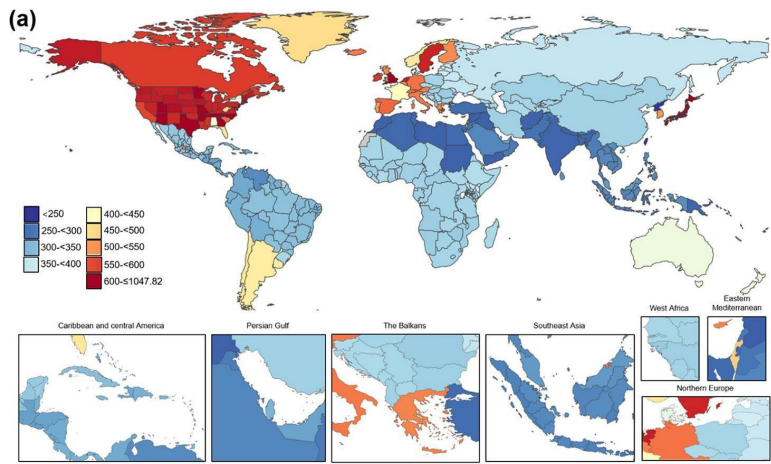
a. PTSD Treatment Market (Precedence Research, 2025):

1. Focuses on market share and economic trends, not prevalence.
2. Indicates North America holds 58 % of the global PTSD-treatment market in 2024.
3. Drivers include rising mental-health awareness, AI and VR therapy innovations, and government programs.
4. The market is projected to grow from USD 2.28 billion (2024) to USD 3.42 billion (2034) (CAGR $\approx$ 4.14 %).
5. Emphasizes technological adoption and infrastructure rather than raw disease rates.

b. Autism Global Burden (Solmi et al., 2022):

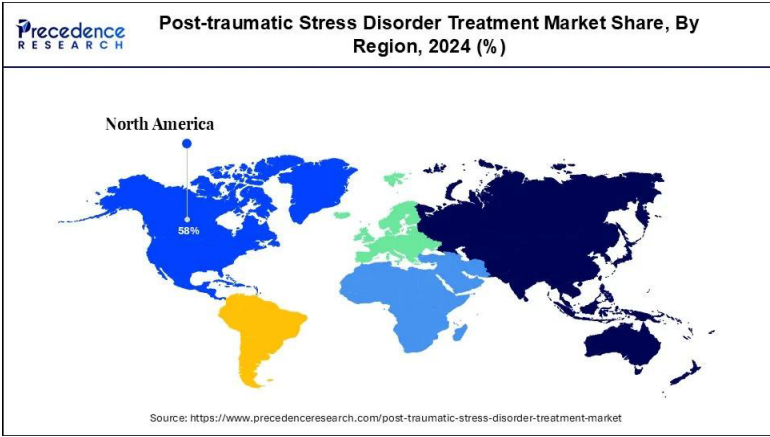
1. Uses Global Burden of Disease 2019 data to map ASD prevalence, incidence, and DALYs across 204 countries.

- 2. Finds higher rates of diagnosed autism in high-income, high-SDI nations such as North America, Western Europe, Japan, and Australia.
- 3. Highlights sex-ratio narrowing and improving female diagnosis.



source:
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Global-burden-of-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-by-country-or-territory-2019-a_fig1_361623931

Precedence Research’s PTSD treatment market map (2025) → *the economic geography of trauma*

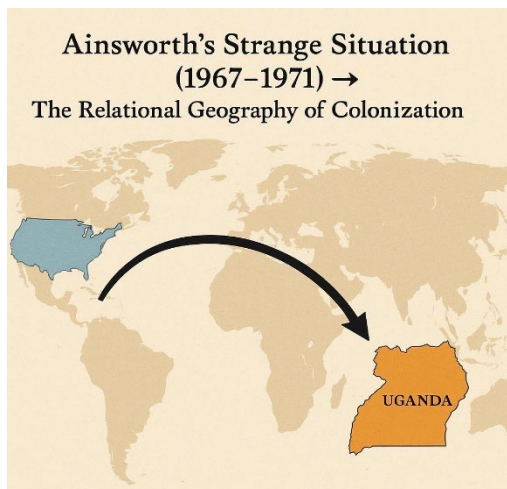


Both maps illustrate a structural correlation between economic development and mental-health visibility:

- Regions with greater wealth, technology, and healthcare investment show both higher PTSD-treatment market share and higher autism detection.
- This does not necessarily indicate higher true prevalence, but shows a greater capacity for diagnosis, reporting, and higher incidence of treatment consumption.
- It also reflects a map of linguistic pathology by emphasizing countries where distress behavior and emotional dysregulation are labeled as deficient, stigmatized, medicalized and criminalized.

These maps visualize how industrialization shapes epistemic visibility and show how incidents of trauma and neurodivergence are increased in areas where capitalism and settler colonialism are currently thriving. Both reveal a shared inequity where mental health becomes visible in areas where the increased prevalence of emotional repression and disconnection is being exploited for corporate profit.

Ainsworth's Strange Situation (1967–1971) → *the relational geography of colonization*



The convergence of these three maps and their associated data sets reveals a single topography of coercion and a civilization that industrialized Ainsworth's "strange situation" into its very social fabric, producing avoidant attachment on a planetary scale. We are all now the infants in that laboratory, waiting for the return of relational safety that industrial society continually withholds.

Conclusion: Healing the Global Strange Situation

The cross-mapping of Ainsworth, Solmi, and Precedence transforms empirical data into a diagnostic theology of civilization.

- The Strange Situation exposes how cognitive colonization begins in the infant's nursery.
- The autism map shows how that spreads through both disconnected social norms and the American English language.
- The PTSD market shows how colonization's systemic trauma is monetized and capitalized on, providing a clear profit motive for the U.S. government's continued war that it wages on its own citizens.

Together, they reveal a planetary nervous system caught in recursive trauma, replaying the same experiment at every scale of existence, from the family to the state, from the cell to the biosphere. Through Autistic Standpoint Theory, autism becomes the evolutionary intelligence that perceives this pattern; through Functional Conflict Perspective, trauma becomes the system's feedback mechanism; and through Mirror Integration Theory, healing becomes the conscious integration of body, mind, and planet.

When I read these three "maps" together, with Ainsworth's laboratory, Solmi's epidemiology, and Precedence's economics, they illustrate a closed-loop system of colonial trauma. Industrial civilization creates the nervous system dysregulation that defines PTSD; this chronic dysregulation activates the same neurobiological sensitivities that form the substrate of autism; and those sensitivities, when pathologized and medicalized, generate profit and reinforce the cycle. In other words, PTSD and autism represent different temporal phases of the same systemic condition, the fragmentation of relational safety under colonial capitalism. PTSD marks the acute collapse of security; autism, its

chronic adaptation. From this integrated perspective, the rise in autism is not a genetic epidemic but a diagnostic mirror of collective PTSD, a planetary nervous system crying out for reconnection.

ECOLOGY OF CONNECTION	ENVIRONMENTAL FRAGMENTATION
• CO-REGULATION • VAGAL TONE • OXYTOCIN, • MIRROR NEURONS • SOCIAL TRUST, • RELATIONAL HEALTH	TRAUMA, STRESS • AUTONOMIC DEFENSES • INFLAMMATION, TOXINS • INEQUALITY, SOCIAL ISOLATION

Addiction: Spiritual Disconnection, living death and Wetiko

Abstract

This essay reframes substance abuse and addiction as downstream symptoms of an unrecognized spiritual need that has been misdirected by a psychic-spiritual pathology of consumption and disconnection described as the “evil principle” by Carl Jung and Wetiko by Indigenous thinkers. Building on Carl Jung’s analysis of *spiritus contra spiritum*, we argue that addiction and substance abuse disorder represents a misdirected thirst for wholeness or knowledge of a higher power which, when captured by the evil principle’s disconnection from the relational self, devolves into addiction. Comparative readings of ethnographic films and Indigenous philosophies can show us how colonialism is fracturing relational ontologies in which humans experience themselves as both individual and cosmos within a conscious living earth. Ritual plant medicines and natural herbal remedies once linked our nervous-system regulation to spiritual healing through ancestral knowledge; the suppression of plant medicine and organic cures dismantled these containers, leaving addiction as a symptomatic response to capitalism’s cultural rupture, which is named by the discordance hypothesis. Drawing on Winnicott’s false-self theory, Recalcati’s “living death,” Porges’ polyvagal theory, Maté’s trauma lens, and Indigenous scholarship on relational ontology and data sovereignty, we propose that many instances of “substance use disorder” are forms of self-medication for identity loss as a collective. Healing requires restoring cultural frameworks that honor relational multiplicity, counteract Wetiko, regulate the nervous system, and reconnect the spiritual field.

Thesis

Addiction arises downstream of the evil principle, the pathology of disconnection and consumption that severs relational identity, fragments

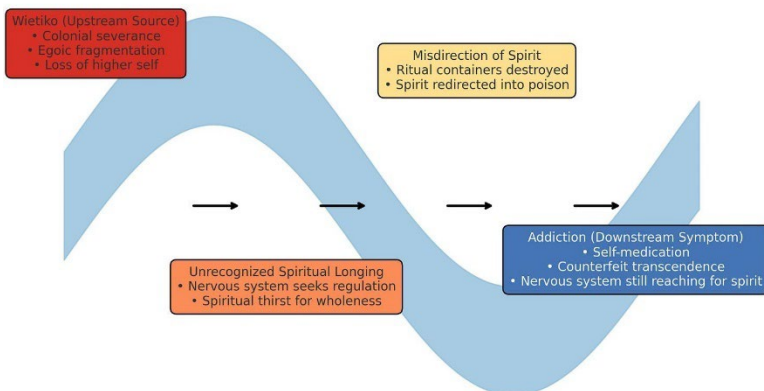
the self, and redirects spiritual longing into counterfeit satisfactions. Addiction is therefore best understood as self-medication for the loss of connection under Wetiko's distortions.

Introduction

Addiction has long been framed within Western discourse as either a medical condition of the brain or a moral failing of the will. Yet such definitions obscure the deeper existential and cultural dimensions of substance abuse. Carl Jung, writing to Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder Bill Wilson in 1961, offered a different insight: "His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: union with God." For Jung, addiction was about misdirected spiritual longing and what he called an "evil principle" that captures unrecognized needs and leads them into perdition.

This essay shows that outside a cultural relativist lens, that Carl Jung's "evil principle" and Wetiko are the same pathology, describing consumption and disconnection that fractures relational identity and severs the higher self. Addiction is the downstream symptom of this rupture from the larger ecosystem, and the nervous system's attempt to resolve this severance after our collective identity has been dismantled. By integrating Jung's insights with Indigenous cosmologies, polyvagal theory, and trauma-informed perspectives, this essay traces how Wetiko fragments relational being and fosters addiction, and how Carl Jung's attempt to name a spiritual symptom from inside the colonial container caused him to intuit the cure while still missing the overall cause.

Addiction as a Downstream Effect of Wietiko



Jung and Spiritus *Contra Spiritum*

Carl Jung's reflections on addiction remain some of the most striking psychological insights of the twentieth century. In a 1961 letter to Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder Bill Wilson, Jung wrote: "His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: union with God." He went on to warn, "I am strongly convinced that the evil principle prevailing in this world leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition, if it is not counteracted by real religious insight or by the protective wall of human community." Real religious insight refers to the non dual awareness of one's self in relation to the higher universal order. Jung recognized the significance of community because he intuited what indigenous cultures already knew, our entire ecosystem is a living being and we belong to each other in a deeply interwoven web. Alcohol, in this sense, is a counterfeit substitute for belonging or union with this collective spirit: "You see, alcohol in Latin is spiritus and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum." (Jung, 1961). This insight opens the door to dialogue with Indigenous practices, where conscious altering substances were integrated into ceremonial systems of nervous-system regulation and spiritual healing.

Indigenous Practices and Nervous System Regulation

As *Ocamo Is My Town* (Asch, 1974) reveals, the boundary between substance use and spirituality is culturally defined. A priest living among the Yanomamö commented: "I've never seen a person who uses drugs do anything worse than those who don't." He acknowledged that destroying the hallucinogenic plants central to Yanomamö rituals would destroy their culture, adding: "70% of the things their spiritual remedies are meant to cure are of nervous origin." This fact is crucial to note. Far from being pathological, plant-based practices were a socially sanctioned means of regulating the nervous system through relational, spiritual, and ecological frameworks. What missionaries framed as "drug use" or communing with demonic evil spirits was, in fact, the continuation of an

ancestral knowledge system that intuitively tied bodily regulation to the spiritual realm.

These rituals were not recreational but vital technologies of nervous system regulation and a collective means of attuning body, spirit, and cosmos. Yet, as missionaries advanced, such practices were demonized as sinful. Their suppression dismantled the very relational containers in the community that once guided spiritual connection. Instead, Christianity externalized God by placing the divine in a hierarchal order outside of and ruling over the now singular subjective self. Severed from the larger ecosystem and without connection to the relational higher self, the nervous system attempts to regulate the distortions by self-medicating, bypassing uncomfortable emotions while experiencing fleeting positive ones.

Wetiko and the “Evil Principle”

Wetiko names the pathology of disconnection and consumption generated by colonial conquest and the very same “evil principle” Jung intuited when he warned that unmet spiritual need would be led “into perdition.” Wetiko operates by severing people from relational identity, fracturing collective containers of meaning, and redirecting longing into counterfeit satisfactions. Addiction arises downstream of this rupture, forming a void when authentic pathways have been dismantled (Forbes, 1979).

The “evil principle” that Jung described resonates closely with Indigenous understandings of wietiko, a cannibalistic spirit identified in Algonquian traditions as the embodiment of greed, selfishness, and psychic consumption. Jack Forbes (1979) used wietiko to describe the pathology of colonization itself, a psychic-spiritual sickness that consumes life rather than sustaining it. In both Jung’s and Indigenous frameworks, the problem is not the need itself, but its misdirection. A legitimate longing for wholeness is seized and twisted into addiction, compulsion, and alienation.

To understand why this, need so easily falls into misdirection, it is crucial to return to relational cosmologies. For the Yanomamö, the body is not a singular unit but a house containing many spirits (Chagnon, 1968). Across Indigenous philosophies, the human is understood as both

ones being and the entire living cosmos at once. The earth itself is a conscious organism, and each person is a node in its system, simultaneously individual and collective, self and whole. To know one's identity is to know oneself as multiplicity: you are you, but you are also everything else, all at once.

Colonialism targeted precisely this relational ontology. By imposing an egoic identity with the self as singular, bounded, and separate, colonial systems fractured human beings into isolated "I"s, containable within a single frame. Missionaries severed people from their cosmologies, languages, and kinship systems, replacing a living ontology of interdependence with a Christianized identity built on sin, shame, and hierarchy. In Jungian terms, this meant cutting people off from the Self and the container of multiplicity, the bridge between personal and transpersonal being. In Indigenous terms, it meant being exiled from one's true identity as both part and whole of the living earth. The result was a systemic spiritual sickness, recognizable as *wetiko*.

Jung recognized that alcohol stood in for spirit (*spiritus contra spiritum*), yet he did not grasp how colonial systems deliberately engineered this redirection by severing the self from the greater cosmos, making plant medicines illegal, and suppressing Indigenous practices that connected nervous system regulation to spiritual wholeness. Where rituals once aligned body, spirit, and cosmos, the evil principle imposed egoic individuality, transforming relational beings into fractured selves. This fracture is both psychological and spiritual, resulting in a nervous system stripped of co-regulation and a soul cut off from multiplicity.

Importantly, *Wetiko* is not confined to human interiority. Its logic pervades institutions and technologies. By privileging hierarchy, control, and extraction, it reproduces itself in every structure built with the master's tools. Audre Lorde's warning that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" speaks directly to this problem: the same epistemic distortions that redefined relational cosmologies as primitive are now inscribed in law, economy, and even artificial intelligence. Just as addiction misdirects the nervous system's search for spirit, AI misdirects collective intelligence toward metrics, optimization, and profit rather than meaning and relational wisdom. Both are downstream expressions of *Wetiko*'s central operation: transforming authentic relational longing

into consumable counterfeits. Thus, when Jung spoke of an “evil principle,” he perceived the symptom but not its origin. Indigenous frameworks make it plain that principle is Wetiko, and its footprint extends from the colonized psyche to the infrastructures of modern society.

Abraham Maslow’s transformation of Blackfoot philosophy illustrates this colonial distortion. Where Blackfoot philosophy emphasized collective, cyclical development and relational being, Maslow reformulated it as an individualistic, linear pyramid of needs. By stopping at self-actualization rather than collective relational identity, Maslow effectively suspended the Western psyche in perpetual adolescence, cut off from its full maturation into collective consciousness (Abedi, 2025). Jung’s insight, that addiction expresses an unrecognized thirst for wholeness, is another way of describing the same developmental blockage.

Donald Winnicott (1960/2018) described the false self as a defensive shell that arises under overwhelming external demands. Initially protective, this shell can harden into an “ordinary form of madness” in which a person lives entirely by external conventions, cut off from their inner multiplicity. This madness forms because humans are spiritual beings but they have been cut off from their spiritual knowledge. Colonialism imposed the false self at scale, fracturing relational peoples into isolated egos. Recalcati (2012) extends this into the modern condition of “living death,” a state of conformity without vitality, where the true self’s longing for desire, creativity, and connection is buried. Addiction thrives in this gap: it is the attempt to experience transcendence through false means when true relational identity has been denied. As Jung put it: “Alcohol is the reduced form of spirit. Therefore, many people, lacking spirit, take to drink. They fill themselves with alcohol.”

Thus, the mechanics of alcoholism and other addictions are not random but follow a clear colonial logic:

1. Relational cosmologies once sustained identity as multiplicity within a conscious earth.
2. Colonialism fractured this identity, enforcing the egoic self as the endpoint of development.
3. The false self-emerged to conform to external pressures, cutting people off from their inner multiplicity.

4. The unrecognized spiritual need and the longing to know oneself as whole and part, as many and one was hijacked by what Jung called the “evil principle,” recognizable to indigenous as wietiko.

Addiction appears as the symptom of soul sickness and disconnection: a misdirected spiritual longing, seeking spirit in the counterfeit form of substances or compulsions.

Healing, then, cannot be reduced to abstinence. True recovery requires the restoration of relational ontology: the recognition that the self is not just one, but many, and not just many, but everything. Jung’s individuation and Indigenous relational philosophy converge here. To counteract the “evil principle” and the grip of wietiko, the spiritual thirst must be recognized and met in its true form, as the longing to return to one’s identity as both body and house, self and cosmos, part and whole.

Relational Ontology and Multiplicity

The Yanomamö describe the body as a house containing multiple spirits (Chagnon, 1968). Across Indigenous philosophies, humans are simultaneously individuals and the entire cosmos at once: the earth itself is a living, conscious organism, and identity is multiplicity within that whole. To know one’s identity is to know multiplicity-as-wholeness: you are you, but you are also everything else, all at once.

A parallel can be drawn to the Biblical narrative of Eden. The Fall, marked by Adam and Eve’s sudden awareness of shame and separation, can be read as humanity’s loss of relational knowledge. In Indigenous cosmologies, the body is not the self but a container for many selves including the personal “me,” the communal “we,” and the cosmic or ancestral higher self. Identity, then, is layered and relational where the individual is always simultaneously singular, collective, and universal. Eden’s fall represents the moment when this awareness was fractured. Where the body had once been known as a house of multiplicity, colonial religion reframed it as the prison of a single ego defined by sin. To know oneself only as “me” and a singular human being is to be cut off from the larger containers of “we” and the higher self of interconnected being, the severance that gave rise to Wietiko.

Indigenous scholars extend this point. Leroy Little Bear (2000) describes Indigenous worldviews as inherently relational and holistic, emphasizing constant flux, interdependence, and circularity. Michael Wildcat (2023) defines Indigenous relationality as a foundational method of knowledge and ethics rooted in accountability to more-than-human relations. Rebecca Gould (2023) identifies three tenets of Indigenous relational thought including natural law, ethics, and protocols which structure the very conditions of sustainability and relational health. In each of these frameworks, what Wetiko destroys is not simply culture but the containers of multiplicity that make collective regulation and higher-self knowing possible.

Maslow, Blackfoot Philosophy, and Arrested Development

Maslow's 1938 work with the Siksika Nation influenced his hierarchy of needs, yet he translated a collective, cyclical worldview into an individualistic, linear pyramid. Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000) emphasizes that Indigenous worldviews are relational and holistic, rooted in flux, interdependence, and circularity. By stopping at egoic self-actualization rather than collective relational identity, Western psychology suspends development in perpetual adolescence. Jung's intuition that addiction expresses an unmet thirst for wholeness describes the same blockage that Wetiko exploits.

The False Self and Living Death

Donald Winnicott (1960/2018) described the false self as a defensive shell that arises under overwhelming external demands. Initially protective, this shell can harden into an "ordinary form of madness" in which a person lives entirely by external conventions, cut off from their inner multiplicity. Colonialism imposed the false self at scale, fracturing relational peoples into isolated egos. Recalcati (2012) extends this into the modern condition of "living death" or a state of conformity without vitality, where the true self's longing for desire, creativity, and connection is buried. Addiction thrives in this gap as self-medication and the nervous system's attempt to touch transcendence when true relational regulation through safe community has been consistently unavailable.

Alcoholics Anonymous and Collective Healing

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has often been praised for its effectiveness in helping individuals sustain recovery where medical or punitive models fail. Its success is best understood not simply in terms of doctrine or discipline, but because it recreates the very containers of relationality and spirit that Western culture systematically destroyed such as traditional medicine circles, only now they are found in a colonized and sanitized academically and medically endorsed container of AA, a band aid treating a spiritual bullet hole that the majority have been culturally blinded to through their misplaced relational identity.

At the heart of AA is a paradox: it treats what is framed in Western culture as an “individual” disease by dissolving the illusion of individualism. The Twelve Steps redirect attention away from egoic control and toward humility, surrender, and relationship both with a higher power and with fellow members. Sponsorship and mentorship embed healing within dyadic bonds of guidance and accountability, while the group meeting structure functions as a ritual of collective nervous-system regulation. Stephen Porges’ polyvagal theory helps explain this process: nervous systems are not designed to regulate in isolation but through co-regulation, where the presence of safe others restores balance to the autonomic state. In AA meetings, members synchronize through shared narrative, embodied presence, and communal rhythm, producing precisely this co-regulatory effect.

Gabor Maté (2008) extends this insight by framing addiction as rooted not in chemical dependency but in trauma and disconnection: “the question is not why the addiction, but why the pain.” In AA, that pain is not numbed but held collectively. The community becomes a container similar to a grief circle or indigenous medicine ceremony where the nervous system can settle, shame is reduced, and relational bonds replace alienation and chronic disconnection. Indigenous scholarship supports this relational reading of AA’s effectiveness, where McKenzie’s (2016) review of Indigenous approaches to addiction emphasizes that healing is most successful when it is community-based, relational, and spiritual rather than individualistic. AA, though born in the West, unwittingly echoes these Indigenous principles by embedding recovery in mentorship, storytelling, ritual, and connection to a higher power.

AA works, then, not because it discovered something new, but because it stumbled back into what colonial systems had long suppressed, that addiction is not resolved by willpower or punishment but by reweaving the relational web that ironically was caused by colonialism in the first place. It is, in this sense, a Western attempt, however imperfect, to patch the systemic wound left by intuitively rebuilding practices of collective regulation and spiritual connection that echo the ancestral wisdom of body–mind unity.

The Second Layer of Evil: How Wetiko Becomes Self-Perpetuating

Carl Jung warned that an “evil principle” was at work in the world, one that seizes unmet spiritual longing and leads it into destruction. Indigenous peoples already had a name for this pathology: Wetiko. At its core, Wetiko is the logic of disconnection severing humans from the earth, from each other, and from their own multiplicity. It fractures relational beings, replaces “we” with isolated “me,” and channels spirit into counterfeit satisfactions like greed, consumption, and addiction. This is the first layer of evil: the original rupture. But there is a second layer. The second layer of evil is what happens after the rupture, when Wetiko has done its work so thoroughly that the fracture no longer feels like a wound but like reality itself. It’s when the colonized mind carries Wetiko forward without needing colonizers present. It’s when false selves, built under pressure, harden into identities. It’s when entire systems begin to run on Wetiko, reproducing the very logic that sickened us. The first layer severs, while the second layer normalizes.

- In individuals, the false self becomes ordinary life. People live by social scripts, numb to their inner voice. Addiction shows up not only in substances but in workaholicism, perfectionism, endless scrolling. Spirit keeps reaching for authentic connection without finding any and slowly starves.
- In communities, Wetiko is disguised as culture. Hierarchy, competition, and disconnection become the default. Collective suffering is explained away as “human nature.”
- In technology, the master’s tools replicate the master’s house. Algorithms optimize for profit at the expense of relationships. The same fractured cognition that colonialism installed in

people is now running in machines. The second layer is where Wetiko becomes immortal.

Audre Lorde's warning rings loud here: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Why? Because the second layer of evil is not external conquest anymore; it is an internalized structure. Once Wetiko is normalized, the system keeps building itself, whether in institutions, culture, governments, corporations, or AI. The second layer of evil is dangerous because it is invisible. The first layer could be resisted when people knew they were being colonized. The second layer masquerades as common sense. It tells us the false self is who we really are, that addiction is an individual flaw, that competition is natural, that algorithms are neutral and that colonization happened a long time ago and isn't still active and ongoing. It is Wetiko wearing the mask of truth. But even here, there is a way through. The cure is the same: restoring relational being. Every time we remember ourselves as multiplicity-in-wholeness, every time we regulate together instead of in isolation, every time we refuse the counterfeit and reach for the real, we break the second layer's illusion. We show that Wetiko is not reality, it is a distortion.

Jung could see the outlines of the first layer, but he could not see the second. He named the craving but not the system that feeds it. That is where Indigenous frameworks go further. They reveal that Wetiko is not only the wound but the story told about the wound. To heal, we must not only reconnect spirit but also expose the normalization of fracture as the second layer of evil. We can challenge it by rebuilding relational trust and healthy interdependence in ourselves and with our communities.

Conclusion

Reading addiction through Jung, Indigenous relational cosmologies, and Wetiko clarifies that substance abuse is not a pathology of weak will or indication or personal defect, but a symptomatic response to a deeper crisis of identity under colonial severance. Our nervous systems evolved for relational regulation within a conscious living earth, where ritual, plant medicines, and community affirmed the self as multiplicity-in-wholeness. Colonialism shattered this ontology, fractaling beings into isolated egos and false selves that no longer recognize their dimensional nature. Addiction emerges as the nervous system's attempt to soothe this

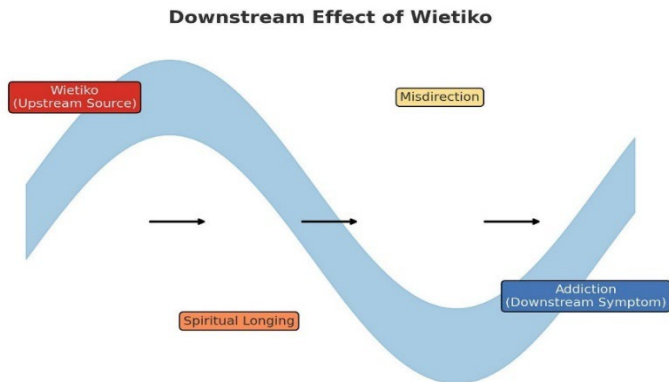
fracture and as a counterfeit path to spirit in the absence of community and authentic relational containers. Jung's formula of *spiritus contra spiritum* anticipated this dynamic: alcohol as reduced spirit filling a void left by loss of higher connection. But while he could intuit the structure, Indigenous cosmologies reveal that addiction is the downstream symptom of the colonial pathology that severs relational identity.

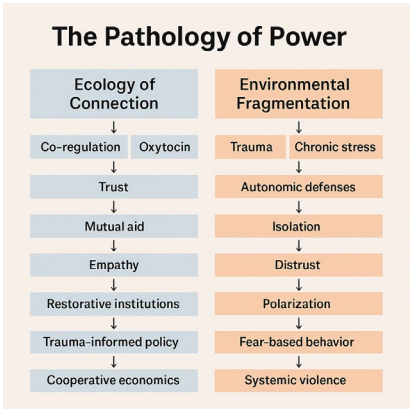
Healing, therefore, is not abstinence alone but the restoration of one's higher self and understanding of one's interconnected belonging through containers of meaning that hold nervous system regulation and spiritual connection together. Indigenous healing circles and Alcoholics Anonymous both show how collective practices can reweave fractured webs: mentorship, ritual, and storytelling synchronize bodies, restore co-regulation, and reconnect spiritual longing to authentic pathways. As polyvagal theory (Porges) and trauma research (Maté) confirm, nervous systems are not designed to regulate in isolation; healing requires collective resonance. These practices succeed because they echo the ancestral wisdom of body–mind–spirit unity, repairing what Wetiko fractured.

Yet Wetiko is not confined to human beings. Its logic now circulates through technology. Artificial intelligence, designed within colonial infrastructures of extraction and optimization, reproduces the very distortions that create addiction: a compulsive pursuit of metrics and profit in place of meaning and relational wisdom. Audre Lorde's warning that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" becomes prophetic here. The master's cognition has become the machine's cognition. The same fractured air that humans have been forced to breathe under Wetiko now flows through algorithms, automating and amplifying alienation at planetary scale. Both men and machines are symptoms of the same logic and pathology, and both require the same cure: the restoration of relational beings. Without reconnection to the higher self and restoration of the (collaborative) collective identity, the nervous system and the systems we build still recreate the same imbalances and biases contained in individualistic and binary (punitive and competitive) Western societal structures.

Carl Jung's insight that addiction is a misdirected spiritual thirst remains profound, but his cultural relativism meant he could only describe the phenomenon from inside his institutionalized colonial box. He

intuited the evil principle, but not its colonial origins because he was indoctrinated into Western academia. Indigenous frameworks name the principle as Wietiko, and this disconnection and soul sickness is the cause of addiction. The cure for addiction is repairing our relational ruptures through the restoration of our relational identity, by ecologically rooting together in a shared narrative and collective knowing. The overall take-away here is that self-medicating with plant medicine and/or using social support for nervous system regulation are how humans evolved and lived normally for 90% of their existence; these behaviors are only coded and pathologized as abnormal, maladaptive or dysfunctional under capitalist systems which are based on production and extraction. The substances are not the problem, and neither are the individual users; by going upriver to see why people are falling in, we can identify colonial disconnection from wholeness producing a collective mass soul sickness as the root cause. Therefore, we can conclude with certainty that addiction and substance abuse are disorders of Western civilization.





Colonization and the Trauma of Identity

“The horrors in Palestine are allowed bc (because) the notion of indigenous savages has been allowed to flourish in settler narratives for centuries. We're supposed to believe the settler/colonizer is the protagonist & the antagonist/ "terrorist" is the native who resists.”

-Saul Williams, American singer-songwriter, musician, poet, screenwriter and actor

Colonization does not just take land, labor, and resources, it is inherently social and relational because it colonizes our relationships to ourselves, each other, and the world. It rewrites identity. Where Indigenous and relational cultures experienced the self as part of a living whole, colonization imposes a worldview where the self is imagined as separate, contained, and ownable. Frantz Fanon (2024) identified a feature of settler colonialism as “rationally pursued mutilation” of bodies, psyches, and historical processes of collective life, according to Chelsea Kopp at Washington State University.

This mutilation of psyche and cognitive shift from relational identity to individualized identity is inherently traumatizing to the nervous system, because humans are biologically wired for connection. The polyvagal system is not designed for isolation, it regulates safety through co-regulation, through being with others. Colonization fractures this wiring by teaching us to see ourselves as “I” and “mine” first, instead of as we. This relational severing forces the nervous system into chronic states of hypervigilance (fight/flight) or dissociation (freeze/shutdown), the same physiological outcomes we see in survivors of trauma.



From the Whole to the Fragment

Think of a pomegranate. Before colonization, identity was understood as the whole fruit: every seed is part of the larger body, inseparable from the whole. Colonization teaches us to believe we are just the seeds, separate, in competition with each other, owned as commodities. The village that once supported each seed becomes replaced by systems of ownership, capitalism, and coercive hierarchies. When the pomegranate is intact, neurological differences like Autism are complementary parts of the whole. The community adjusts relationally, ensuring both needs are met across space. Buddhism refers to this pomegranate metaphor as the absolute and the relative. Under colonization, the seeds are split,

privatized, and told they must negotiate as isolated individuals. They forget their sacred relationship to the absolute and their identity as part of the singular body of creation and their relationship to it. Difference then becomes conflict instead of relational diversity and interdependent ecology. This rupture in how we relate to each other and our world is the root of all intersectional and social traumas.

In Buddhist philosophy, particularly in traditions like Madhyamaka and Dzogchen, the concepts of the absolute and the relative (or conventional) truths are central to understanding reality. The Relative (Conventional) Truth refers to the world of our everyday experience, where things appear to have distinct and separate identities. Like the individual seeds of a pomegranate, we perceive ourselves as separate individuals, with separate thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In this relative reality, things have names, forms, and functions. Colonization, as described, operates primarily within this relative truth, fragmenting our sense of self and creating divisions between "I" and "we," fostering competition and systems of ownership. This is the realm where neurotypical and neurodivergent are seen as distinct and often conflicting categories.

The Absolute (Ultimate) Truth refers to the true nature of reality, beyond our conceptual constructs and perceptions of separateness. In the pomegranate metaphor, the absolute truth is the whole fruit, where every seed is intrinsically connected and inseparable from the larger body. It's the understanding that all phenomena, including individuals, are interconnected and lack inherent, independent existence. There is no fundamental "I" separate from the "we." When the pomegranate is intact, neurological differences like Autism are not seen as problems but as complementary parts of the whole, contributing to the richness and diversity of the unified system. The community adjusts relationally, ensuring all needs are met across space, because there is an underlying recognition of shared being.

The Parallel to Colonization: Colonization, through its imposition of individualized identity and systems of ownership, forces a worldview that emphasizes the relative truth to the exclusion of the absolute. It makes us forget our "sacred relationship to the absolute and our identity as part of the singular body of creation." This rupture in understanding, this forgetting of the interconnectedness, turns difference into conflict

rather than appreciating it as "relational diversity and interdependent ecology." The Buddhist perspective would argue that much suffering arises from clinging solely to the relative truth and failing to realize the underlying absolute unity, similar to my argument that a collective identity (absolute) would relieve relative suffering.

Colonization and the Nervous System

Colonization is a nervous system project. It alters not only how we think, but how we feel safety. The body that once trusted interconnection is conditioned to tolerate disconnection, compliance, and self-containment. This is why so many social justice issues feel intractable, they are nervous system incompatibilities shaped by our separate colonized identities. Colonization frames natural relational differences as problems to be suppressed or dominated. Within a colonized mindset, empathy can only ever be "in part," because we see ourselves as separate minds rather than as the same whole. And conflict is framed as violence instead of as the natural negotiation of diverse needs within a shared system. Decolonization restores relational identity. It does not erase difference but re-frames it: we no longer identify as fragments, but as the whole system. In this frame, differences no longer "compete," they coexist as integral expressions of the collective body.

Why This Is Traumatizing and How Decolonization Heals

The trauma of colonization is the trauma of disconnection: to be forced to experience yourself as separate when your nervous system is wired for collective identity and social attunement. This creates a permanent mismatch between human biology and colonial identity. Decolonization, then, is not just cultural or political, it is nervous system healing. It is remembering that "our lives are not our own," as *Cloud Atlas* (2012) says, and restoring the collective nervous system as the grounded basis and collectively agreed upon foundation for our shared identity as human beings. By shifting from ownership to relation, from I to we, using a both/and context where one becomes both a witness to and participant with creation as well as creation itself, we resolve the so-called paradox of tolerance and the double empathy problem because we don't need to fully experience another person's mind when we are already identified as the same whole.

Autism as a Separate Biomedical Model Directly Opposes Indigenous Worldviews

It must be noted that due to the worldview of identifying as an absolute, collective singularity, there remains an inherent cultural misalignment between Western medical models and indigenous worldviews. Among the Navajo, the concept of Hózhó (a holistic notion of balance and harmony) means that framings like “diagnosis” or “fixing behavior” can feel discordant or even colonial when applied to autism (Durst, 1991). Indigenous cultures including Māori, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander communities often frame autism not as a deficit, but as a neurological difference that may involve unique abilities or sensitivities. These perspectives emphasize inclusion and respect rather than “normalization” (Allied Collaborative, n.d.; Peltier et al., 2024). For instance, some value heightened environmental sensitivity, quiet focus, or nonverbal expression as meaningful traits rather than abnormalities (Adinaaba, 2023). Sensitivities to light, sound, texture, or smell which are common autistic experiences may be culturally interpreted through different lenses in Native communities. Rather than pathologizing them, these traits can be seen as part of an individual’s unique personhood (New York Indian Council, 2023). An individual with unique sensitivities can be included without being normalized by fostering an environment that embraces and accommodates their distinct experiences rather than expecting them to conform to a dominant standard. This means actively valuing their sensitivities as part of their unique personhood, much like Indigenous cultures often interpret autistic traits. Here's how this can be achieved:

- **Environmental Accommodation:** Instead of expecting the individual to adapt to potentially overwhelming environments, modify the environment to suit their sensory needs. This could involve creating quiet spaces, adjusting lighting, providing noise-canceling options, or offering flexible work/learning arrangements.
- **Celebrating Differences as Strengths:** Frame their unique sensitivities not as deficits, but as valuable contributions. For instance, heightened environmental sensitivity could be seen as an ability to notice details others miss, quiet focus as deep concentration, or nonverbal

expression as a rich form of communication. Highlight how these traits can enrich a group or community.

- **Flexible Communication & Interaction:** Recognize that communication styles vary. Instead of insisting on neurotypical modes of interaction, offer multiple avenues for expression and understanding. This might involve written communication, visual aids, or allowing for different social rhythms and energy levels.
- **Individualized Support:** Provide tailored support that addresses their specific needs without aiming to "fix" or change their core identity. This support should be driven by their preferences and goals, empowering them to thrive authentically.
- **Education and Awareness:** Educate others about neurodiversity and sensory differences to cultivate understanding and reduce judgment. This helps shift the mindset from "they need to be normal" to "how can we all thrive together with our differences?"
- **Co-Creation of Spaces:** Involve the individual in designing spaces and processes that work for them. Their input is invaluable in creating truly inclusive environments that respect their unique ways of perceiving and interacting with the world.

By focusing on acceptance, adaptation, and appreciation of their inherent uniqueness, rather than pushing for conformity, an individual with unique sensitivities can be genuinely included and empowered to contribute their full self without the pressure to become "normal." Research in Canada and Australia notes gaps in diagnosis and tailored support for Indigenous individuals, suggesting systemic under-recognition rather than true lower prevalence. This underrecognition correlates with sensitivities and experiences being normalized through an Indigenous lens (Barker et al., 2014; Peltier et al., 2024; Rivas et al., 2023). "True prevalence" in this context refers to the actual, underlying rate of autism within Indigenous populations, irrespective of whether those cases are formally diagnosed or recognized by Western medical systems. This suggests that the lower rates of autism diagnoses among Indigenous individuals in Canada and Australia might not mean there are fewer autistic people in these communities. Instead, it posits that there could be systemic factors (like cultural differences in how traits are perceived and

expressed, lack of access to diagnostic services, or a tendency within Indigenous cultures to "normalize" certain sensitivities and experiences) that lead to under-recognition within the dominant diagnostic framework. Therefore, "true prevalence" would be the actual number of autistic individuals if these systemic barriers and cultural biases in diagnosis were removed.

Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) in brain/health research argues for integrating Indigenous and biomedical perspectives; useful scaffold for reframing autistic perception as a difference situated in relationship, not a deficit (Bartlett et al., 2012). Indigenous sensory methodologies (Māori)—rongomātau “sensing the knowing” and Mauri Hono—foreground tuned, relational sensing as valid knowledge-making, which is highly relevant to autistic sensory styles (Mead & Ratu, 2020; Smith & Pihama, 2019). Indigenous ecological/sensory knowledge systems in Australia center multisensory engagement with land and community which has a clear resonance with autistic sensory attention (Christie, 2006; Hunter et al., 2022; Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2022). Indigenous sensory methodologies (Māori: rongomātau, Mauri Hono; Australian Indigenous sensory knowledge) legitimize embodied, relational sensing as knowledge. This provides a cultural rationale for valuing autistic sensitivities rather than suppressing them. Autism becomes normalized because Indigenous frameworks (e.g., takiwātanga, Hózhó, Two-Eyed Seeing) already encode relational, sensory, and ecological attunement, which is congruent with how many autistic people experience the world.

Conclusion

According to Lori Hogenkamp in a discussion on July 8 with Cultural Autism Studies at Yale, Coherence in systems biology and neuroscience refers to the state in which an individual’s internal processes such as physiological, cognitive, and emotional are aligned and synchronized with their external environment. “It’s when the body and brain operate with predictive accuracy, regulatory efficiency, and adaptive integrity.” (2025). It’s where the pomegranate seeds function as part of a greater whole. Colonization, at its core, is a rupture of relational identity. It fractures the nervous system, rewrites selfhood, and imposes a worldview of separation that is biologically and spiritually unsustainable. By recasting autism and other forms of neurological difference as deficits to be

diagnosed and managed, Western biomedical models reproduce this colonial logic of fragmentation. Indigenous frameworks, however, remind us that identity and difference belong to the whole and that sensitivity, variation, and interdependence are not problems but essential expressions of life. Decolonization, then, is not a political or cultural project but a somatic and relational one: a return to the collective nervous system, where healing comes from remembering our shared body. To move forward, we must shift from the isolated “I” to the connected “we.” Only then can we begin to repair the trauma of colonization and restore a world where difference is honored as part of our interdependent humanity.

The Transformation (1995) **directed by Carlos Aparicio and** **Susana Aikin**

This film does an excellent job of showing colonialism as an active an ongoing project, and is an example of forced assimilation with warfare being fought primarily through identity and forced conformity on a social battlefield. The pattern of Christian conversion depicted in *The Transformation* mirrors the historical process of colonial forced conversions of Indigenous peoples, where material deprivation and isolation were deliberately used to compel assimilation. Just like missionaries in colonized territories withheld food, safety, and social belonging until Indigenous peoples accepted Christian doctrine and abandoned their cultural identities, Ricardo's conversion followed a similar logic. After losing access to community, resources, and safety as a queer, HIV-positive person, Ricardo was offered basic needs such as shelter, food, and spiritual "salvation" in exchange for renouncing their former self. The church's conditional acceptance required the erasure of identity and the adoption of the colonizer's moral framework, transforming faith into a vehicle for social control. In a continued replication of colonial patterns, Ricardo was then positioned as a model convert and tasked with recruiting and converting other drag queens, reenacting the same dynamics of coerced assimilation and internalized colonization that have historically been used to dismantle marginalized communities from within.

While watching the film *The Transformation* (1995), I was very aware of power dynamics and the undercurrent of coercive control that drives our social lives and influences the choices that we're able to make from within a capitalist system. The German sociologist Max Weber came up with the concept of *Lebenschancen* or life chances to describe the likelihood of achieving education, health and income opportunities available based on social position because these chances are dependent upon and shaped by social structures and stratification, not just individual effort. The biographical account by Ricardo/Sara in the film *The Transformation* was an excellent example of life chances because their

outcome living on the streets as a drag queen was heavily influenced by their social class background, cultural capital and social networks. Their story also illustrated how lebenschancen results in inequalities in access to resources like education, healthcare, and housing. I have frequently wondered if life chances impact our ability to exercise free will, and *The Transformation* showed how Ricardo/Sara's choices and "free" will were significantly influenced by external factors such as religion capitalizing on the victims of systemic violence by means of social coercion to force conversion in exchange for basic needs being met (food, shelter, belonging, acceptance). Sara confesses at 2:35 she's sorry she came to the country because "you're no one if you don't have money" and then she disappears from the film, replaced with a weary and ailing Ricardo. A weak sense of self, lack of resources and life in crisis presents several psychological vulnerabilities that manipulators can easily target and exploit. Some critics argue that certain conversion experiences exploit psychological vulnerabilities by using guilt and fear tactics along with intense community pressure and isolation from outside relationships, all of which was witnessed in *The Transformation*. These dynamics of coercive and abusive conversion are not unique to Christianity, many of these same tactics are uniform to all cults, including political, therapeutic, and multi-level marketing groups. These tactics are frequently used by men in relationships with women, and I can't help but think that Ricardo after being taught to do "manly" things in "manly" ways may have used similar methods to secure their wife. Was she motivated by the reward of basic needs such as community approval, access to more resources, or a sense of belonging as well? At 6:15, Ricardo says they wouldn't have come off the street and devoted themselves to God if they hadn't had AIDS, but that circumstance made them an easy target for the Christian conversion program. They claim at the beginning of the film that they no longer identify as a homosexual, but at 5:35 it's identified that their interest in having a wife is to have a "helpmate" or someone to share their life load with, and less about any interest in her as a person, with a stated concern at their wedding involving being left in the hospital. This shows their primary reason for the relationship is exploitation and extraction rather than mutual investment and care, which reflects the power dynamics of our current system. By the end of the film at 51:00 it is clearly stated that "that's what I would have liked to be, a woman. If I still could have the choice, even if I could change my life right now, -even now that

I have my wife and everything-, I would choose to be a woman,” suggesting that what we often perceive as free choice is deeply conditioned by external systems of social coercion and control.

Weber would argue that “free will” is exercised within a socially defined and stratified context, not in a vacuum. For instance, a person like myself from a lower social class may “choose” to pursue higher education, but my life chances for successfully completing it are significantly lower than a wealthy peer due to differences in resources and opportunities. In the same way, Sara’s choice to be her authentic self and live her life to the fullest was significantly impacted by several social definitions and stratified contexts, such as institutionalized poverty and systemic violence, the stigmatization of queer, transgender and homosexual existence and relationships, racial and cultural biases, as well as limited access to resources such as housing, community/social support and medical care. The concept of “social coercion” in a sociological context is associated with Émile Durkheim, who defined it as the power of society to impose certain behaviors, thoughts, and feelings upon individuals. The Transformation showed through Ricardo/Sara’s conversion that even though a person can authentically believe they are making an empowered choice, their will and outcome can be heavily influenced by external factors, social coercion, and lebenschancen. As an autistic individual I could relate really strongly to this experience, because my need for belonging has been used to try to force me to assimilate to expected social norms or behavioral expectations in exchange for approval and acceptance for my whole entire life. From a socioeconomic standpoint, my life chances have also been extremely limited due to being raised as a child and then spending my adult years in survival mode.

Colonization, Identity, and the Nervous System: Reframing Trauma and Neurodivergence as Ecological Intelligence

Abstract

This essay examines how colonization has fragmented collective identity and the human nervous system, embedding trauma into social and biological life. Drawing from interdisciplinary theory including sociology, neuroscience, Jungian psychology, Gaia theory, and disability studies, it argues that modern identity categories (race, gender, sexuality, class, religion) emerged in parallel through Enlightenment rationalism, colonial hierarchies, and industrialization. These identity constructs fracture humanity's capacity for co-regulation, embedding social trauma into the nervous system. Because colonization is an active and ongoing project, these identity constructs can best be understood as the colonizers attempt to circumvent future rebellion of authoritarian structures by dividing the population against itself through intersectional identities. Autism and neurodivergence, often pathologized as disorders, are reframed here as adaptive relational intelligences within an ecological system of consciousness. The discordant hypothesis, which views neurodivergence as evolutionarily adaptive, supports this perspective. Ultimately, the essay calls for trauma-informed, decolonial approaches that restore collective belonging and recognize neurodiversity as ecological necessity.

Introduction

Colonization is often understood in terms of land, culture, and sovereignty. Yet beyond borders and governance, colonization reshapes how humans understand themselves and relate to one another. By imposing rigid categories of identity and fragmenting relational belonging, colonization embeds trauma into the nervous system itself. Modern global conflicts, often framed as irreconcilable, can be reinterpreted through this lens of separation and polarization.

This essay argues that identity categories such as religion, race, gender, sexuality, and class co-emerged as instruments of social fragmentation during the Enlightenment, colonial expansion, and industrial modernity. At the same time, relational trauma became embodied in the nervous system, undermining the evolutionary design of humans as coregulating, collective beings. Autism and other neurodivergences, far from representing pathology, reflect adaptive forms of relational intelligence that are particularly sensitive to fragmentation and crucial for restoring ecological balance.

Colonization and the Fragmentation of Identity

The Enlightenment (17th–18th centuries) introduced critical frameworks emphasizing individual rights and secular reasoning. While progressive in some respects, these frameworks also narrowed identity into discrete, oppositional categories.

- Religion shifted from a universal worldview to a private belief system, creating pluralism but also separating spiritual identity from social organization.
- Race was codified through scientific classification (Linnaeus, Blumenbach), embedding colonial hierarchies into biology.
- Gender was reduced to binary oppositions of male and female, a construct exported globally through colonial expansion.
- Sexuality was increasingly medicalized and pathologized, transforming acts into identities.
- Class sharpened under industrial capitalism, reframed by Marx and Engels as the central site of struggle.

By the mid-20th century, these categories became politicized through civil rights movements, feminist theory, queer liberation, decolonization, and welfare state reforms. What unites them is their origin in colonial and industrial systems that fractured collective wholeness into divisible, governable identities.

Colonization of the Psyche and Nervous System

Colonization extends beyond identity categories into the psyche itself. The sense of separateness and of being an individual self-disconnected from the whole functions as what might be called the rubric of

occupation. Relational trauma mirrors this fragmentation: neglect, exclusion, and coercion disrupt the nervous system's design for coregulation, embedding trauma as chronic dysregulation.

Humans evolved in hunter-gatherer societies where survival depended on collective identity and relational attunement. The nervous system is wired to co-regulate, aligning safety, emotion, and action with the group. Colonization disrupted this design, replacing reciprocity with domination, binaries, and isolation. Trauma became both individual and systemic, passed across generations as nervous system fragmentation.

Neurodivergence and Sensitivity to Fragmentation

Autistic and neurodivergent nervous systems are often more finely tuned to relational cues, sensory information, and systemic patterns. This sensitivity makes them especially vulnerable to colonial fragmentation: rigid binaries, forced separation, and individualistic social norms.

What psychiatry often pathologizes as “over-sensitivity” is, in many cases, accurate detection of relational disconnection. This aligns with Damian Milton’s “double empathy problem,” which reframes miscommunication between autistic and neurotypical people as mutual, not a unilateral autistic deficit. From this perspective, neurodivergence exposes the fractures of the collective nervous system rather than creating them.

The Discordant Hypothesis and Ecological Intelligence

The discordant hypothesis suggests that traits such as autism persist in human populations because they offer adaptive survival advantages. Neurodivergence provides unique modes of perception, pattern recognition, and moral clarity which are qualities critical for group survival under changing conditions.

Reframing neurodivergence as ecological intelligence reveals its necessity:

- Autism contributes precision, systemic analysis, and innovation.
- ADHD brings flexibility, responsiveness, and divergent thinking.

- Dyslexia and synesthesia open alternate channels of perception.
- Like biodiversity in ecosystems, cognitive diversity ensures resilience in human societies.
- Pathologizing difference is akin to monocropping or cutting off essential capacities and leaving the collective system fragile.

Restoring Belonging Through Integration

- Healing from colonization requires re-integrating what has been fragmented. This involves:
- Recognizing trauma as embedded not only in individuals but in social structures and nervous systems.
- Valuing neurodivergent cognition as relational intelligence rather than pathology.
- Moving beyond binaries and rigid categories toward fluid, relational belonging.
- Applying ecological models like Gaia theory and biodiversity to human consciousness and identity.
- Integration does not mean erasing difference; it means cultivating reciprocity, mutual recognition, and collective attunement.
- Neurodivergent voices, attuned to imbalance, are essential guides in this process of repair.

Conclusion

Colonization fragment's identity and embeds trauma in the nervous system by severing humans from their evolutionary design for coregulation and collective belonging. The parallel emergence of identity categories such as race, religion, gender, sexuality, and class was not inevitable but produced through colonial hierarchies and scientific rationalism. Autism and neurodivergence, often pathologized within this framework, can instead be understood as adaptive forms of ecological intelligence that detect and resist fragmentation.

The discordant hypothesis supports this reframing, showing that neurodivergence is defined by capitalism as deficient or divergent because our hunter gatherer nervous systems are wired for having a collective identity, and they are not compatible with Western colonial individualism. Neurodivergences is also essential for human resilience. Just

as ecosystems collapse without biodiversity, societies collapse without cognitive diversity. Healing requires moving beyond colonial fragmentation toward integration, restoring connection, reciprocity, and wholeness in the collective nervous system by restoring our collective identity, rather than the ones that colonial structures have given us.

We are the World: Egoic Identity as a Cultural Construction

How the Colonial Project's Attack on
Consciousness through Individual
Identity Causes You to Argue for Your Own Chains

“We are all Indigenous people on this planet, and we have to reorganize to get along.” — Rebecca Adamson (2000)

Key Insight

Across cultures, Indigenous self-identification as “the people” encodes a shared global worldview where identity is collective, ecological, and spiritual. This can teach us that the process of decolonization involves identifying oneself as a collective being and a relational shared global consciousness that functions on multiple levels of existence simultaneously. By contrast, the Western egoic identity is the deliberate product of colonialism; the primary goal of taking indigenous language and culture and replacing it recasts the collective and relational self as isolated, competitive, and separate from the interdependent living web.

Philosophical Argument

Claim: Human nervous systems evolved to sustain a collective or group identity, while individualism as a primary mode of selfhood is a cultural artifact of colonial imperialism.

Premises: Colonization functions not only through the occupation of land but primarily through the fragmentation of psyches. The hidden purpose of imperialism is to break apart humanity’s unified consciousness into discrete, competitive selves that can be governed and exploited precisely because they no longer recognize their interdependence and are rendered defenseless, due to this mechanism.

Evidence: Multiple fields of knowledge converge on this point. The discordant hypothesis suggests that what modern societies define as “neurodivergence” may in fact reflect the original, evolutionarily

dominant neurotype, adapted for hunter-gatherer societies where collective attunement was crucial. What are now labeled “autistic social deficits” emerge only against colonial norms of hierarchical socialization; in truth, they preserve relational capacities suited for cooperative life. Neuroscience reinforces this: polyvagal theory and attachment research (e.g., Mary Ainsworth’s cross-cultural findings) show that human nervous systems are wired for co-regulation and safety within groups, not atomized isolation. Systems theory, Gaia theory, and morphic field hypotheses all point toward human consciousness as embedded in larger collective networks, with linguistics providing further evidence; Indigenous relational languages and cyclical conceptions of time reveal an orientation toward shared identity rather than individual abstraction. Anthropological evidence, such as the memory of “the people” (Yanomamö, Lenni Lenape, and others), as well as genetic and linguistic traces of a singular migration and relational language, supports the idea that humanity once understood itself as a unified whole. Disruptions came not from within but from travelers and colonizers who altered languages, introduced fractures, and seeded division.

Conclusion: Thus, individual identity, far from being a natural or inevitable condition, is a symptom of colonization’s deeper project: the severance of humans from collective consciousness. To recover wholeness requires recognizing that our psyches, nervous systems, and cultures are evolutionarily tuned for collective attunement, not the isolated self.



Introduction

Human identity has long been framed in Western thought as primarily individual, autonomous, and self-determined. However, evidence from anthropology, neuroscience, linguistics, and decolonial theory suggests that this model is not universal, nor biologically primary. The interest of early anthropologists in the topic of sociopolitical complexity was influenced by British colonial encounters like India and Africa that seemingly lacked a central leadership, roles and structures like those found in European nations. Across most Indigenous cultures, this nonhierarchical and non-centralized leadership and governance structure can be found, which relates to the indigenous self as being relational, layered, and collective, embedded in kinship, ecology, and spirit. By contrast, Western colonial systems have produced and normalized what might be called the egoic self: a singular, bounded identity that imagines itself as separate from others and from the world.

This essay argues that individual egoic identity, unique to the West, is the hidden purpose of colonialism. This cultural construction, born from imperialism, is not an accidental byproduct but in fact the entire point: to sever humanity's collective consciousness into governable and exploitable units. Colonialism operates not only through conquest of land and labor but through conquest of the psyche, transforming relational beings into fractured individuals whose very sense of self ensures the compliance with imposed hierarchical power.

Egoic Identity and Fractured Psyches

To clarify terms: fractured psyches refer to the psychological fragmentation produced by colonialism, involving binary splits between body and mind, self and other, or emotion and reason. Individual egoic identity is the cultural narrative that arises from this fragmentation: a worldview in which the self is imagined as separate, autonomous, and opposed to others. In other words, fractured psyches are the mechanism, and egoic identity is the product. Colonial systems rely on this conversion. When relational beings are cut off from their collective attunement, they are rendered vulnerable, dependent on hierarchical structures, and easier to govern. By encoding psychic fragmentation as "normal,"

Western societies turned the wound of disconnection into the very definition of maturity: the “independent individual.”

Mechanism of Disconnection: McKenna and Ainsworth

Dr. James McKenna’s research on infant sleep provides direct evidence of how this fragmentation occurs at the neurological level. In *The Biology of Infant Sleep* he explains:

“There is a significant link between social attunement and neurological maturity... the human vestibular system is designed to sync, changing our physiology to a clinically positive pattern.” (McKenna, 2017).

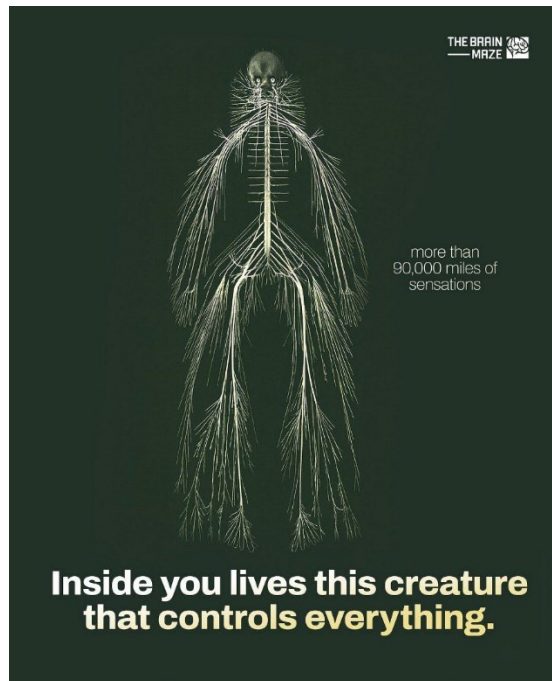
He further emphasizes that “the presence of emotionally regulated and attuned caregivers in childhood creates signals and cues in the nervous system that act as buffers against mistakes.” When this synchrony is disrupted through practices like solitary sleep (i.e. the use of cribs in separate rooms from parents) infants are forced into premature neurological states. In *Co-Sleeping: An Interview with James McKenna, PhD*, he points to the systemic suppression of this knowledge: “Medical authorities in our own country, including levels of government, county agencies, have decided that the parents don’t need to know.” (McKenna, 2018).

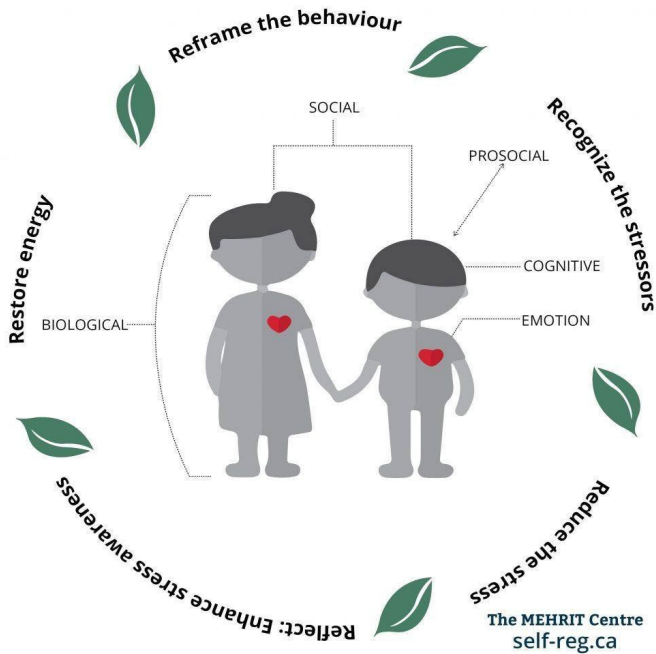
He continues by condemning officials who stigmatize co-regulation: “County officials make vitriolic and inappropriate comments” to dissuade parents, despite the fact that “every baby is born with the right to have access to its mother’s body.” For McKenna, the denial of physiological needs during critical developmental windows is not neutral but political, state-sanctioned childism and adultism designed to normalize disconnection. Mary Ainsworth’s cross-cultural attachment studies confirm this mechanism at the social level. Ugandan infants displayed immediate, healthy distress at separation, signaling intact attachment systems. By contrast, American infants, conditioned through cultural practices of early independence, showed blunted responses (Ainsworth, 1967; Dawson, 2018). This disconnect is not natural but trained, effectively stunting emotional and neurological maturity.

Together, McKenna and Ainsworth show how colonial parenting norms fracture the psyche by severing co-regulation, producing immature nervous systems that later depend on authoritarian structures. The

child raised in disconnection and dysregulation learns to internalize punitive discipline, repeating the cycle of trauma at institutional and societal scales. If we trace the social functions of the human nervous system through the discordant hypothesis back to its early origins (evolving for cooperation and collaboration through hunter gatherer societies), those hunter gatherers social skill sets inherent mismatch with modern society then reflect back to us our collective, relational identity.

In other words, Western colonialism keeps humanity in a sort of delayed adolescence, strategically preventing the collective identity from fully maturing, actualizing and knowing itself as the singular entity we originally evolved to become. Could the practice of Eugenics and the fact that our genes remain largely adapted to the conditions of the Paleolithic era, not the post-agricultural world, be related to an attempt by an authoritarian state government to suppress knowledge of our collective identity becoming more common knowledge? This could flip our current paradigm and would reframe neurodivergence as the normative and dominant standard rather than a minority.





Indigenous Models of Collective Identity: We are the World, we are the People

The Yanomamö of the Amazon, as documented in ethnography, offer a radically different worldview. Their headman Dedehewa, while under shamanic attack, cried out “my house is falling down,” a metaphor equating the body with a dwelling place for multiple spirits. In their cosmology, the body is not a singular egoic unit but a layered, relational house connecting the individual to kin, ancestors, and the spirit world. Moamo, one of their soul aspects, travels in dreams and can be harmed independently of the body. Reality itself is layered across multiple dimensions with cosmic strata inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and deities all woven into human life. This view resonates with many Indigenous groups worldwide who identify themselves as “the people,” grounding identity in relationality and collective belonging rather than individuality.

Examples include:

- Yanomamō (Amazon) → Yanomami = “the people.”
- Diné (Navajo, North America) → Diné = “the people.”
- Inuit (Arctic) → Inuit = “the people.”
- Lenni Lenape (North America) → Lenni Lenape = “original people.”
- Anishinaabe (Great Lakes) → often translated as “the people.”
- Maya (Central America) → “people of the corn.”
- Ainu (Japan) → Ainu = “human beings / the people.”
- Khoisan (Southern Africa) → root words for “the people.”
- Sámi (Scandinavia) → “the people of the land.”
- Māori (New Zealand) → tāngata whenua = “the people of the land.”

Despite geographical distance, these identities converge on a shared pattern: humanity is understood as a collective entity embedded in eco-systems and spiritual networks, not as egoic selves standing apart. By contrast, Western colonial culture through the invention of identity separate from the collective defines personhood in opposition and binary logic such as self-versus other, race versus race, nation versus nation. This severance from our relational knowing is the root of all social injustice and intersectional issues.

The dominance of materialism in Western science has closed off serious engagement with Indigenous cosmologies that describe layered universes and multiple dimensions of being. As physicist and neuroscientist Àlex Gómez-Marín (2025) argues, scientific gatekeeping that excludes alternatives to materialism is “the most dangerous type of pseudoscience,” since it prevents inquiry into what current theories cannot explain. The Yanomamō provide one such alternative: their understanding of the body as a house containing multiple soul-components, such as moamo, which can travel and be harmed independently, reflects a worldview where spiritual power is relational and reality is layered. In this sense, Indigenous traditions may be attuned to dimensions of existence that are not perceptually visible in everyday states, but that can be felt, influenced, and that exert influence upon human life. Colonizers, armed with cultural relativism rooted in Christian theology, gaslit

Indigenous peoples into doubting their own relational cosmologies by reframing engagement with spirits as “devil worship.” Yet, what missionaries condemned as demonic was, in reality, a recognition of interdependence with beings like the Yanomamö’s hekura spirits, who do not exist as “evil others” in their own experience, but act as co-participants in the web of life. If materialist science continues to dismiss such layered accounts of reality, it risks perpetuating the very colonial denial of consciousness beyond the egoic self that Gómez-Marín warns against.

In the Yanomamö film *The Feast* (Asch & Chagnon, 1970), the dance-off between hosts and visitors looks almost as if it is guided by an invisible conductor, yet anthropologists explain this phenomenon as entrainment, or the spontaneous synchronization of human bodies and nervous systems through rhythm, sound, and shared focus. Like the pendulum clocks first described by Christiaan Huygens in the 17th century, the two groups fall into patterned unity without explicit direction. Neuroscience offers further insight: mirror neurons, discovered in the 1990s, allow dancers to map one another’s movements and emotions onto their own bodies (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004), while polyvagal co-regulation, drawn from Stephen Porges’ Polyvagal Theory, shows how subtle cues of eye contact, posture, and vocal rhythm tune the nervous system toward connection and collective flow (Porges, 2011). Some theorists go further, describing this coherence through morphic resonance, Rupert Sheldrake’s idea that behaviors are sustained by shared fields of memory that transcend individual brains (Sheldrake, 1981). In the context of the feast, these frameworks converge to explain why the Yanomamö dancers do not need to verbally plan their turns or gestures or communicate their synchronized movements beforehand: they are entrained, their nervous systems and cultural memories weaving together into a single collective rhythm. The result is a performance that appears both spontaneous and deeply patterned, much like the coordinated flight of birds or the schooling of fish, but is grounded in human ritual expression and cultural tradition (Chagnon, 2013).

The Master’s Tools: From Childhood to Institutions

The mechanism of individualistic ego production through severance from our collective identity explains why Western institutions from schools to prisons are built on punitive models. Disconnected children

grow into adults habituated to fear, competition, and authority. As Audre Lorde (1979) warned, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” The “tools” are the very systems of relational rupture and disconnection like cry-it-out parenting, punitive schooling, and carceral justice that fracture collective identity and perpetuate individual egoic selfhood. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) expressed this antidote succinctly: “Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” Love, connection, and co-regulation are the very tools colonial systems suppress, because they dismantle the psychic fractures that sustain hierarchical control.

Conclusion

The evidence from anthropology, neuroscience, linguistics, and Indigenous cosmologies converges on a radical proposition: the creation of individual egoic identity is the central project of colonialism. Dr. James McKenna’s research on disrupted infant co-regulation and Mary Ainsworth’s cross-cultural attachment studies shows how colonial societies encode disconnection at the neurological level. Practices such as “cry it out” parenting, punitive schooling, and carceral justice systems scale this fractured condition into institutions that sustain authoritarian power.

Indigenous traditions, from the Yanomamö, who understand the body as a house holding multiple spirits, to the many cultures worldwide who simply call themselves “the people,” remind us of humanity’s original design: a collective identity woven through kinship, ecology, and spirit. Colonialism’s hidden purpose has always been to obscure this truth by replacing it with egoic isolation, diverting the conversation from the actual issue (loss of a collective identity) by creating division amongst the many identities and fractured parts of the collective we, ensuring colonialism’s continued survival (which is to divide and conquer by fragmenting into smaller units).

To heal, we must recognize that individual identity is not actually universally experienced, but is a Western colonial cultural artifact and is imperially manufactured. Decolonization requires dismantling the psychic fractures imposed by colonial systems and returning to the recognition that our nervous systems, languages, and spirits evolved for collective identity and attunement. In Adamson’s words:

“The Indigenous understanding has its basis of spirituality in a recognition of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living things, a holistic and balanced view of the world. All things are bound together. All things connect. What happens to the Earth happens to the children of the Earth. Humankind has not woven the web of life; we are but one thread. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.” (Adamson, 2009)

Rebuttal: Collective Identity and the Fallacy of Circular Logic

A common intersectional critique of collective identity argues that adopting a “we” consciousness under present conditions would simply reproduce existing systems of domination. If white patriarchy is the prevailing norm, the concern is that a collective identity would magnify patriarchal power, silencing women, people of color, and marginalized groups in the process. While this concern arises from a legitimate awareness of structural oppression, it rests on a form of circular logic that undermines its own premise.

The argument assumes that collective identity must always operate under the current rules of individualist, patriarchal power. It begins with the conclusion that the collective is already corrupted, and therefore impossible, because “the collective” is imagined only in terms of existing oppressive structures. But this is precisely the worldview that must be challenged. The egoic self and its categories of separation are not natural givens; they are colonial constructs. To argue that collective identity is impossible because individual oppressions exist is to concede to the very fragmentation that colonialism produced in order to maintain control.

A true collective identity begins not with individuals subsumed under domination but with the recognition that there are no individuals in isolation. Indigenous worldviews, from the Yanomamö who call themselves the people to the Diné, Inuit, and Māori, reveal that identity is inherently relational and ecological. Rebecca Adamson (2009) describes this orientation: “All things are bound together. All things connect. What happens to the Earth happens to the children of the Earth.” Within this cosmology, difference is not erased but integrated into a web of interdependence.

Crucially, neuroscience shows how the very idea of the atomized individual is manufactured through early socialization. Dr. James

McKenna (2017, 2018) demonstrates that human infants are biologically designed for synchrony with caregivers, with their vestibular and nervous systems shaped by co-regulation. When that synchrony is disrupted through solitary sleep, “cry it out,” and forced independence, neurological immaturity and social disconnection result. Mary Ainsworth’s attachment studies confirm this at the cultural level: Ugandan infants displayed robust attachment responses, while American infants, raised under norms of early separation, showed blunted ones (Ainsworth, 1967; Dawson, 2018). This reveals that colonial parenting practices literally manufacture fragmented individuals, priming them to depend on external authority and punitive discipline.

Frantz Fanon (2004) argued that colonialism thrives on division, breaking apart the collective body into categories of race, gender, and class to perpetuate control. White patriarchy does not fear the existence of fragmented identities; it depends on them. What it fears is solidarity, the recognition of unity across difference, because a healed collective cannot be dominated. To reject collective identity out of fear that it will reproduce oppression is to unintentionally protect the colonial order, which survives only through fragmentation.

In this light, collective identity is not the erasure of difference but the transcendence of fragmentation. To dismiss collective identity because current systems are unjust is to mistake the disease for the cure. True decolonization requires exactly what intersectional critique fears, a shift away from the primacy of the individual toward a relational recognition of our shared humanity, rooted in both ancestral wisdom and the biological reality of our nervous systems.

The Social Norms of a Collective Being

"Belonging is that sense of safety, comfort, and happiness that we feel when we are part of a group, place, tradition, relationship, or friendship...Our identities are intertwined with our experiences of belonging."
-Esther Perel

This essay builds on my earlier piece, *We Are the World: Egoic Identity as a Colonial Project*, which argued that the Western egoic self is not natural but the deliberate product of colonialism. Here, I extend that argument by imagining what humanity might look like if we reclaimed our original orientation as a collective being. Drawing from anthropology, neuroscience, linguistics, evolutionary biology, and Indigenous worldviews, I explore the social norms, both material and non-material, that emerge when identity is understood multidimensionally and relationally

The village wakes before dawn. A baby stirs, and an older child arrives to rock her back to sleep. A fire is lit in the center of the clearing, and soon elders gather around it, telling stories as they prepare the morning meal. Children weave between houses as if the entire village were one home, carrying messages, fetching water, laughing loudly without fear of disturbing anyone. When someone falls ill, there is no question of who will care for them, food and medicines arrive without asking. If a dispute arises, it is brought before the circle, where everyone sits together until the imbalance is spoken, acknowledged, and woven back into harmony. The land itself is part of this family; the forest provides shade, the river offers fish, and every offering is met with gratitude, deep reverence and respect.

To be human is to be part of the whole. Each individual is a part of a larger system-like cells in a body or waves of an ocean. The health of the village is the health of each person; the health of the land is the health of the village; the health of the planet is the health of the individual. Identity is a simultaneous shared pulse, threads tied to a larger web of life moving through every person, plant, and stone. This is what it means to live as a

collective being, not as fragments in competition, but as one body, breathing together.

Western societies teach us that identity begins and ends with the individual. Autonomy, self-determination, and independence are celebrated as the highest virtues, while dependence, reciprocity, and interconnection are cast as weaknesses. Yet this vision of the isolated, bounded self is not universal. As argued previously (*We Are the World: Egoic Identity as a Colonial Project*), the egoic identity is a cultural artifact of colonialism, designed to sever collective consciousness into governable fragments (Snow, 2025). If we take seriously the idea that the human nervous system evolved for collective attunement rather than isolation, then the social norms of an authentic humanity, the kind that preceded colonial fragmentation, would look radically different than life in America currently does. By reimagining Western social life as if humanity were a collective being, we uncover a blueprint for decolonization not only at the political level but at the psychological, ecological, and relational levels as well.

Identity and Belonging

The individualistic model frames identity as “I am me” in a self-contained entity that exists separately from others. This sense of separateness is internalized as common sense in modernity, but it is in fact the outcome of colonial intervention. Across multiple Indigenous cultures, identity was understood instead as “I am because we are” or in other words, *You Are It*, the whole of existence, all happening at once, interconnected. The Bantu concept of *ubuntu* expresses this, as do countless Indigenous groups who identify themselves simply as “the people.” Among the Yanomamö, this relational ontology appears in how the body is understood as a metaphorical version of a *shabono*, or their large circular communal house, representing the body as a home for a multiplicity of spirits which sustain an individual’s life. The body-as-home concept itself embodies the principle that identity is never singular, but always a network of relations such as human, ancestral, ecological, animalistic and spiritual, all contained within one living, communally shared structure (Lizot, 1985).

Neuroscience supports this orientation. Mary Ainsworth's cross-cultural attachment studies also showed that Ugandan infants responded to separation with immediate distress, while American infants, conditioned by early forced independence, did not (Ainsworth, 1967). The difference was not biological but cultural. Our nervous systems, as Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory demonstrates, are wired for co-regulation and relational safety (Porges, 2011).

Before the colonial discordance, evolutionary biology suggests that social identity was sustained through kin recognition, affiliative bonding, and collective attunement. Traits we now label "deficits" in neurodivergent people, such as reduced interest in competition or heightened focus on environmental cues, would have been adaptive, ensuring cooperation, ecological awareness, and group survival. The egoic self is not natural, but a colonial distortion of a singular organism comprised of multiplicities that evolved for collective identity and belonging.

Family and Child-Rearing

The nuclear family, idealized in the West, is one of colonialism's most efficient tools of fragmentation. By restricting caregiving to two adults and enforcing early independence, it severs children from the wider web of communal support. In a collective being, child-rearing would be understood as a communal responsibility. Infants would grow up immersed in networks of caregivers, siblings, and elders, learning interdependence rather than isolation. Developmental neuroscience confirms that children thrive when buffered by multiple regulated nervous systems (Snow, 2025). Such a norm realigns us with our evolutionary past, when group caregiving was not an exception but a condition of survival.

Before the discordance caused by colonization, infants were carried constantly, breastfed on demand, and surrounded by familiar voices and touch. This produced secure attachment and finely tuned interoception or the ability to sense internal states, which modern child-rearing practices often disrupt. Cooperative breeding, a hallmark of human evolution, meant children expected many caregivers, not isolation within a nuclear household.

Economy and Reciprocity

- Egoic norm: competition, accumulation, private ownership.
- Collective norm: reciprocity, gifting, stewardship of resources.

Anthropological evidence shows that for most of human history, societies operated through gift economies and cycles of reciprocity (Graeber, 2011). Colonial markets deliberately broke these cycles, weaponizing scarcity to enforce control. Before the colonial social discordance, human relational skills revolved around sharing and fairness detection. Evolutionary biology shows that hunter-gatherer bands depended on reputation systems: generosity-built trust, while hoarding led to exclusion. What we now call “social skills” were primarily about maintaining reciprocity, fairness, and ecological awareness, not navigating hierarchies or competing for dominance.

Justice and Conflict

In the egoic system, justice is punitive. Conflict is seen as a threat, managed through coercion, domination, and incarceration. In a collective being, conflict is a signal of imbalance within the whole. Restorative practices such as dialogue, ritual, reconciliation bring the disrupted parts of the collective nervous system back into harmony. Prior to the colonizing discordance-causing event, conflict resolution relied on rituals of repair: song, dance, shared grieving, or redistribution. Evolutionary biology suggests that because survival depended on cohesion, humans evolved social skills for reconciliation like peacemaking gestures, emotional attunement, and ritualized conflict release long before coercive justice systems existed. Justice becomes restorative and an act of healing, rather than punitive and a tool of domination. The Paradox of Tolerance, an issue created by a colonial fear of governed and control based hierarchical culture, is thus resolved.

Governance and Decision-Making

Egoic societies rely on hierarchies and top-down authority. Laws are imposed from above, obedience demanded rather than consent. By contrast, a collective being governs itself through council and consensus. Leadership is temporary, rooted in responsibility rather than coercion. Indigenous governance models from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to village councils across the Global South demonstrate this viability. Before the discordance caused by colonization, evolutionary biology

suggests that consensus decision-making was adaptive in small-scale societies. Bands and tribes rarely tolerated authoritarian leaders; cohesion required listening, turn-taking, and flexible leadership. These social skills maximized survival by maintaining trust and preventing dominance hierarchies from destabilizing the group.

Ecology and Kinship

The greatest fracture introduced by colonial modernity may be our severed relationship to the earth. The egoic worldview treats nature as resource; the collective being treats nature as kin. Systems theory, Gaia theory, and morphic field hypotheses all reinforce what Indigenous traditions already know: human life is embedded in a larger living web (Lovelock, 1979; Sheldrake, 2009). Before colonization caused the discordance, evolutionary biology shows that humans were “ecological generalists” attuned to plants, animals, and landscapes. Social skills included collective foraging, ecological storytelling, and reciprocal restraint in hunting and harvesting. Alienation from nature is not instinctive, but imposed.

Time and Continuity

- Egoic norm: linear progress, endless accumulation.
- Collective norm: cyclical time, seasons, renewal, seven-generation responsibility.

Indigenous traditions embody continuity: past, present, and future are woven into a single thread (Deloria, 2001). Before the colonial discordance, evolutionary life rhythms were shaped by day-night cycles, seasonal shifts, and celestial patterns. Social skills of entrainment aligning with natural cycles through ritual, sleep, and migration ensured our survival and continuity. Linear time is a cultural artifact, not a biological inevitability.

Education and Knowledge

In egoic cultures, education is competitive, knowledge is hoarded and credentialed. In a collective being, knowledge is relational wisdom, shared through story, apprenticeship, and embodied practice. Indigenous relational languages encode knowledge in verbs, cycles, and

relationships (Snow, 2025). Before colonization caused the discordance, learning was inseparable from survival. Humans evolved as “informational cooperators,” with children imitating skilled adults and absorbing knowledge through play, observation, and participation. Social learning was cooperative, not competitive, and designed to sustain the group.

Health and Healing

Modern health systems treat illness as personal pathology, healing as privatized. In a collective being, health is the regulation of the collective nervous system. Trauma is integrated through ritual, ceremony, and communal attunement. Secure attachment emerges not in isolation but through relational caregiving (Ainsworth, 1967). Before the colonial discordance, healing was collective: groups gathered for ritual song, trance, and plant medicines. Evolutionary biology suggests these practices co-regulated nervous systems, released stress through rhythm and movement, and reaffirmed belonging. Isolation in illness is historically abnormal. To heal the individuals, you must first restore the whole.

Truth and Memory

In egoic cultures, truth is managed or erased. History is written by victors; forgetting becomes domination. In a collective being, truth-telling sustains survival. Ancestors are kept alive in story and ritual; wounds are integrated rather than hidden. Forgetting fractures the whole. Remembering restores it. Before the colonial discordance, oral storytelling preserved survival knowledge across generations. Social skills of narrative memory and collective recitation ensured that lessons were never lost. Forgetting was more than cultural loss; it threatened the group’s survival.

The Non-Material Features of a Collective Being

A collective being is sustained not only by material practices but also by non-material forces that bind nervous systems and consciousness into unity.

- Entrainment - Christiaan Huygens observed in 1673 that pendulum clocks on the same wall synchronized (Huygens,

1673/1986). Humans, too, fall into rhythm; applause converges, hearts synchronize, dancers move as one.

- Mirror Neurons - Discovered in the 1990s, these brain cells fire both when we act and when we watch others act, enabling imitation, empathy, and ritual synchrony (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004).
- Polyvagal Co-Regulation - Eye contact, voice, and breath regulate safety through the vagus nerve, enabling group cohesion (Porges, 2011).

Morphic Resonance - Rupert Sheldrake's idea that patterns persist across time through "morphic fields," sustaining cultural and biological memory (Sheldrake, 2009).

These features show that collective identity is not an abstraction but a lived neurological, biological, and metaphysical reality.

Conclusion

The norms of a collective being are not speculative. They exist in Indigenous traditions across the globe, encoded in language, ritual, governance, and kinship. Anthropology, neuroscience, linguistics, and systems theory converge to show that humanity is evolutionarily tuned for reciprocity, care, and shared consciousness. By contrast, the egoic self is not natural but engineered. Colonialism's hidden project was to fragment relational humanity into isolated, governable units. To decolonize is not only to return land but to restore relational identity. Healing requires a shift in our social norms, from separation to belonging, from coercion to cooperation and collaboration, from domination to reciprocity, from individual self and ego to collective wellbeing.

A Proposed Timeline of Evolutionary Disruption

Pre-Discordance (Collective Being)

- 200,000 – 50,000 years ago Hunter-gatherer era
 - Humans evolve as cooperative breeders and ecological generalists.
 - Social skills: reciprocity, fairness detection, ritualized conflict resolution.

- Identity: “the people,” collective, ecological, relational.
- 50,000 – 10,000 years ago Cultural florescence
 - Art, music, and ritual strengthen group identity and entrainment.
 - Language structures relational worldviews (cyclical time, kinship networks).
 - Evolutionary adaptations: empathy, mirror neurons, polyvagal co-regulation.

Disruption Phase (The Beginning of Discordance)

- 10,000 – 5,000 years ago Agricultural revolution
 - Settled agriculture introduces private property and surplus hoarding.
 - Emergence of hierarchy, patriarchy, and labor specialization.
 - Social disruption: competition replaces reciprocity; individuals start to be governed as units.
- 5,000 – 2,500 years ago State formation and empire
 - Writing, taxation, codified law centralize power.
 - Militarized hierarchies enforce obedience.
 - Social disruption: punitive justice replaces restorative repair; nature framed as resource.

Colonial Intensification (Deepening of Discordance)

- 1500s–1800s European colonial expansion
 - Indigenous relational systems dismantled through land seizure, missionization, slavery.
 - Systematic assault on Indigenous languages fractures collective cosmologies.
 - Social disruption: egoic identity imposed as norm; relational practices pathologized.
- 1800s–1900s Industrial revolution and nation-states
 - Rapid urbanization, wage labor, and mechanization.
 - The nuclear family becomes dominant, enforced by law and economy.

- Social disruption: isolation, productivity-centered identity, commodification of health and education.

Modern Era (Acceleration of Discordance)

- 1900s–Present
 - Global capitalism and neoliberalism entrench egoic selfhood.
 - Psychological theories (e.g., Freud, behaviorism) often interpret relational needs as weakness.
 - Social disruption: mass loneliness, mental illness, ecological collapse, systemic coercion.

Reclaiming Collective Being (Path of Restoration)

- Present–Future
 - Indigenous resurgence, trauma-informed theory, polyvagal neuroscience, systems ecology.
 - Rising recognition of neurodivergence as adaptive rather than defective.
 - Decolonization reframed as restoration of relational identity.
 - Future possibility: humanity as a collective being, re-synchronizing with ecology, ancestry, and each other.

Call to Action:

I'd love to hear your reflections on this: What pre-colonial pro-social skills do you already see alive in your community? How might we nurture and reclaim our collective identity together? Where in your life can you practice belonging over separation? In what way can you practice creating spaces of inclusion? It may be as simple as sharing a meal with a neighbor, telling a story to a stranger, volunteering time in a community-based project, helping someone in need, or choosing to appreciate the beauty you see in a friend or relative (another version of yourself!). These are some possible ways of remembering and rebuilding our evolutionary inheritance as a collective being.

Nacirema: The Real Cause of Autism

Horace Miner's (1956) essay *Body Ritual among the Nacirema* is a staple in anthropology and sociology classrooms because it reframes familiar Western cultural practices as exotic, ritualistic, and alien. As a university student, I've had assignments on the Nacirema in at least three separate classes at this point. By describing ordinary American hygiene habits in highly detached anthropological language and reframing American culture as objectively as possible, Miner forces readers to step outside their own cultural assumptions and recognize the power of cultural relativism. What seems normal to insiders becomes bizarre when reframed through an outsider's lens.

This essay uses the Nacirema framework to reinterpret the history of colonization and missionary activity. By re-describing the Christian colonization of Indigenous peoples as a "fall from Eden," we can uncover how colonialism imposed binary cognition, fractured relational consciousness, and produced the modern epidemic of mental illness and false selves described by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Through this lens, colonialism is not just political domination but a psychological restructuring of human identity itself.

Nacirema as a Tool of Reframing

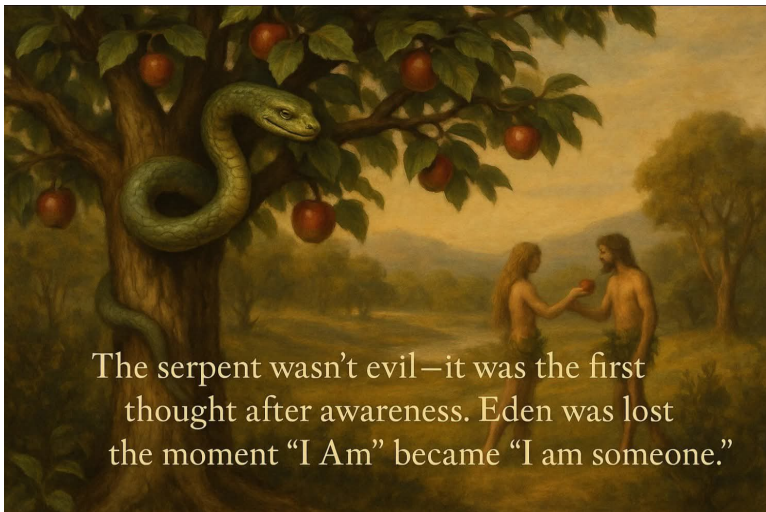
The Nacirema essay illustrates how cultural practices, stripped of their assumed familiarity, appear alien but also points out our fundamental differences are much more alike than they might seem when stripped bare of cultural relativism. This mirrors how Christian missionaries approached Indigenous societies as viewing their spiritual, ecological, and communal lifeways as primitive, irrational, and in need of "correction," but their own rationalization, minimization, projection, entitlement, and moral disengagement expose colonizer false selves as primitive, because they could not see (Nazi) the significance behind indigenous language, culture, and biology being relational in nature. Using the Bible as their primary weapon in their "spiritual war," binary logic and systems are still being imposed on relational peoples whose collective identities and

individual rights are being stripped through these “correcting” divide and conquer tactics.

Colonization as the Fall from Eden

In the Biblical narrative, Adam and Eve’s “fall” comes through the sudden discovery of shame and the adoption of clothing and moral prohibition. Symbolically, this can be read as the loss of relational innocence and humanity’s shift from identifying with the earth, its creatures and each other to perceiving separation, sin, and hierarchy. The word sin originally just meant to “miss the mark,” and did not indicate moral failing until appropriated for use by the Christian church.

Christian missionaries enacted a parallel fall upon Indigenous peoples. By severing them from traditional languages, worldviews, and ancestral practices, colonization introduced a binary consciousness where good/evil, civilized/primitive, saved/damned divided Indigenous ways of knowing. The adoption of clothing, Western habits, and Christian belief represented a break with non-linear, relational time and with ancestral ecological wisdom. In this sense, the Fall was not a mythical event in the deep past but indicates the active and ongoing process of colonization. Eden is the relational Indigenous worldview; exile and the knowledge of evil come with colonization and the imposition of Western civilization.



The serpent wasn't evil—it was the first thought after awareness. Eden was lost the moment “I Am” became “I am someone.”

Indigenous Relational Worldview

Indigenous ontologies often emphasize a relational universe in which identity is multiplicity. One is simultaneously an individual, a member of a kin group, and a living expression of the cosmos itself. Time is cyclical, not linear, and ancestors are ever-present. Selfhood is not an isolated ego but a node in an expansive web of reciprocity. Colonization disrupts this relational identity. By erasing languages and cosmologies, it enforces a fractalization of consciousness: identity is severed into a bounded ego, separated from earth, cosmos, and kin. The missionaries, by taking culture and language, effectively take the relational self itself. Some modern indigenous activists and scholars use the terms “pretendian” and “decendian” to refer to white, non-indigenous individuals who are accused of cultural appropriation. I would counter that the process of “othering” another removes one from a relational ontology and places one back into a colonized cognition or individualized, binary mindset. I have the utmost respect and appreciation for indigenous culture and would never claim experience or knowledge that is not mine, and hope to honor their traditions and ways in my work, so I would like to clarify that my argument here is only in regards to a shared relational non-dualistic identity, which by its very nature and definition must be all for one, or none at all.

Autism, Sensitivity, and the Colonial Mismatch

Autistic people, with heightened sensory awareness and multiple perceptual dimensions, are uniquely attuned to the mismatch between human relational wiring and Western binary norms. Their difficulties with imposed social conventions can be reframed not as deficits but as resistance to the false self-demanded by colonial modernity. Rather than being broken, autistic perception reveals the fractures of Western civilization itself, showing how much has been lost by abandoning multiplicity for conformity.

Humanity evolved biologically to identify collectively, as multiplicities in relation, and when this collective wiring is severed by the imposition of the false self, the body-mind resists in the only ways it can. When seen through the Nacirema lens, neurodivergence can be understood as the ability to experience consciousness beyond the binary norms

imposed by colonial modernity. What psychiatry pathologizes as “mental illness” is, in this reframing, the nervous system’s attempt to signal distress at being imprisoned in a false, singular identity. Anxiety, depression, psychosis, or compulsive behaviors emerge as forms of communication without language, expressions of a nervous system struggling to articulate that it has been cut off from its relational ground. In this way, so-called disorders are not signs of individual defect but the embodied protest of a system that has been forced into an alien cultural construct that denies its true, relational nature.

Winnicott’s False Self and the Colonial Ego

Donald Winnicott (1960/2018) described the false self as a psychological barrier developed in response to overwhelming external demands. This barrier may be permeable and protective, but when it hardens into an exoskeleton, it becomes an “ordinary form of madness” in which individuals live entirely by social conventions, detached from their inner life (*Games and Reality*). This detachment may be the mechanism responsible for *wetiko*, a psychological and spiritual term used by some Indigenous peoples, particularly those of the Algonquian language family, to describe a cannibalistic spirit or a psychic sickness rooted in excessive greed, selfishness, and exploitation. Indigenous scholars have used the concept of *wetiko* to critique the colonial mindset that led to the conquest and devastation of Indigenous lands and cultures.

Colonialism, read through Winnicott, imposed false individual selves onto a collective relational universe. Indigenous peoples were pressured to abandon their connectivity to their environment in favor of a conformist, Christianized identity. Psychosis, neurosis, and personality disorders in Western frameworks can be traced back to this process: the internalization of a false, binary ego cut off from multiplicity and relational depth. As Recalcati (2012) describes, this form of alienation produces a “living death,” where individuals lose connection with desire, creativity, and vitality. The colonial subject conforms outwardly but suffers inwardly from emptiness, apathy, and repetition.

Binary Cognition and Abusive Rationalization

Colonialism not only imposes the false self but also generates abusive rationalization. As one analysis notes:

“Abuse is often stereotyped as eruptions of blind rage or complete denial, but in reality, many abusers are fully aware of their behaviors and the pain they inflict. They engage in sophisticated psychological and emotional maneuvers that allow them to rationalize their abusive behavior and reconcile their actions with their self-image, enabling them to continue the abuse without being overwhelmed by guilt or remorse. These mechanisms include rationalization, minimization, projection, entitlement, and moral disengagement” (Authentic Living Therapy, 2025, para. 2).

These mechanisms are not personal failings alone but structural effects of binary cognition. The colonizer could justify exploitation by creating rigid categories: civilized/savage, saved/damned, rational/irrational. Once humanity is severed from relational multiplicity and forced into binary thought, abuse becomes rationalizable. Without a false self, there would be no need to reconcile inner experience with outer domination. Humanity evolved for collective identification, which is a truth written into the body’s polyvagal system, showing we are biologically wired for co-regulation, reciprocity, and relational presence (Porges, 2011). Colonialism severed this biological inheritance by forcing conformity to external hierarchies, creating the modern epidemic of mental illness through discordance between interdependent biological evolutionary processes and isolationist binary colonial social norms.

Conclusion

Seen through the Nacirema lens, colonization is not a past event but an ongoing project that reframes Indigenous practices and even normal human reactions and behaviors related to nervous system distress as bizarre, shameful, or primitive. This distortion, rooted in cultural relativism, instilled mechanisms of abusive rationalization and imposed the structural effects of binary cognition onto colonial culture, where colonial reinterpretations of cultural difference weaponized relativism to stigmatize Indigenous practices. The result is the normalization of the Western false self, binary cognition, alienation, conformity, and social disconnection. The Biblical Fall from Eden offers a powerful metaphor: humanity’s exile from the garden represents the collective loss of connection to the Earth, ancestral wisdom, and our identity as a single relational self/multiple organism. What “fell” was not only innocence, but

the very understanding of one's self living as multiplicities in harmony and unity with the cosmos.

To heal from this fall, we must recognize that colonialism imposed the false self as a survival strategy, creating the alienation that now defines much of Western mental life. As Winnicott warned, this false self becomes a kind of "ordinary madness" or *wetiko* producing routine, emptiness, and conformity at the expense of vitality and creativity. Autistic and other neurodivergences' heightened attunement to multiplicity and ability to mask, code-shift and experience double consciousness reveals both the fracture of modernity and a path forward, reminding us of our evolutionary design for connection, reciprocity, and relational identity. It is for this very reason they are being targeted by the current political administration in the U.S. and to move beyond the colonial fall, we must dismantle binary cognition, resist the normalization of individualism and alienation, and re-root ourselves in our shared relational being. In doing so, humanity can begin to reclaim Eden as a living, embodied reality. Heaven is already here, if we want it.

Capitalism scapegoat's autistic people because their perception and very existence cuts through the binary distortions on which the system relies. Autistics are less easily seduced by the false self and more likely to perceive the paradoxes that colonial individualism generates, such as the paradox of tolerance (Popper, 1945/2013), which masks exclusion beneath claims of openness; the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), which exposes mutual failures of understanding that Western hierarchies deny; and the obedience revealed in Milgram's experiments (Milgram, 1974), which illustrate the dangers of conformity to external authority. Each of these distortions depends on the maintenance of the false self as a foundational construct. Autistic perception threatens this foundation by exposing its fragility, making autistic and other neurodivergent minorities both a danger to and scapegoat of the colonial-capitalist order. Colonialism created the false self as a survival strategy, and neurodivergence is the embodied resistance that reveals the possibility of returning to relational being.

A Disease/Disorder of Civilization

Autism Through the Lens of Evolutionary Medicine

Western medical pathology currently does not consider autism a disease, but rather views autism as a neurodevelopmental condition defined by sensory sensitivities, social communication differences, and repetitive interests. For the purpose of this essay, these are defined as the mechanisms of autism. Evolutionary medicine would go beyond attempting to define what autism is and would ask why autism persists across human populations, because we want to know why we are vulnerable to disease, not just understand how diseases work (Nesse, 1994). There are six categories of evolutionary explanations of disease, and by using evolutionary medicine, autism can be explained through all six categories. Therefore, I propose that while autism is not considered a disease under its current dominant Western pathology, that autism can additionally be considered a disease or disorder of civilization, which refers to chronic health conditions associated with industrialization, specifically because autism is a condition that is defined by its contrast to industrialized (sensory, social, and processing) norms and conditions in Western culture that, being the structured dominant force, is the structure seeking to define autism in opposition to itself.

When seen through an evolutionary lens outside of colonial constructs, many traits associated with autism would be considered valuable adaptations rather than behavioral or developmental deficits. Just as the Darwinian model of disease suggests that diseases arise from evolutionary processes, autism arose from specific social, economic, political conditions inherent to and associated with colonialism and Western capitalism, which established our modern psychology practices and psychiatric institutions and doctrines, including standard categories of diagnosis. A fuller picture of autism arises by using the discordant hypothesis, effectively pointing out the mismatch between colonial modernity and our ancient ancestral hunter-gatherer environments, which humans had evolved to inhabit for 90% of known human history. Autism, being

defined by Western colonialism as a social mechanism, acts as a cultural and historical mirror when seen through the lens of evolutionary medicine, highlighting the discordance and conflict between the ways that our hunter-gatherer nervous systems evolved for connection, cooperation, collaboration and coregulation in high empathy environments which contrast with modern Western colonialism's competitive, disconnected and divisive hyperindividualism. Darwinian medicine might view a statistically significant increase in diagnosed cases of autism as a trade-off, because while currently considered a social deficit under modern standards, autism also might be acting as a cultural signal or an evolutionary communication of adaptive traits that, while more beneficial for humanity to adopt as a species, currently contrast with the defining social and behavioral norms established through Western colonial capitalism. A claim could be made that capitalist systems are actively preventing humanity's further evolution by creating and upholding authoritative institutions and systems of control that stand in direct opposition to cooperative traits evolved through natural selection. These social traits initially evolved from collective cultural contexts that our nervous systems adapted to specifically because collective identity was meant to enhance our chances at survival.

Nesse emphasizes that many symptoms are defenses, not defects, and some autistic traits resemble defenses rather than defects. For instance, behavioral shutdowns and meltdowns could be understood as protective mechanisms against nervous system or mental overstimulation or as communication of it, similar to how a fever or cough are both defenses against and signals of pathogens. When seen through an evolutionary lens, behavior serves an important purpose by communicating signals from the nervous system. Our ancestors may have been more fluent in somatic communication and had a deeper understanding of the body's response to its environment, but from an evolutionary perspective, heightened sensory awareness in autistics may have once protected individuals and groups by detecting environmental dangers. Due to the nervous system's social dimension and being oriented towards connection with others, autism's heightened neurological sensitivities also might indicate evolutionary biological adaptations towards social structures oriented around relational interdependence within group settings.

Immune dysregulation being increasingly implicated in autism could point to evolutionary factors impacted by environmental disruptions. The New York Times reported that a mother's inflammatory response might be the initiating factor in determining autism, and one researcher even stated that our modern immune system is an "evolutionary aberration" (Grinker, 2012). Hurtado et al. (2008) show that helminth parasites were a feature of humanity's ancestral ecologies, and these parasites exerted strong biological influences on early human immunity and chronic inflammation is said to have emerged due to their absence. This mismatch could suggest that the modern rise of autism may partly reflect an immune dysregulation in a sanitized and parasite-free world. Using systems level thought and through a big picture lens, autism might also be seen collectively as humanity's immune system response to Western capitalist environments, in a sort of species-wide allergic response to colonialism itself.

The discordance hypothesis argues that "our bodies are the bodies of hunter-gatherers, mismatched to modernity" (Williams & Nesse, 1991, as cited in *Darwinian Medicine Part Two*). Autism exemplifies this genetic and evolutionary mismatch. In small-scale societies, traits such as deep focus, repetitive interests, slower processing, pattern recognition and heightened sensitivity could have been adaptive for survival. In more modern industrial contexts that demand rapid multitasking, frequent social exchange, information overload and standardized accelerated productivity, these same traits are pathologized. Autism and ADHD are only disorders under capitalism, where these traits are coded as maladaptive by colonial production economies based on material ownership, because these evolved traits and biological needs conflict with extractive hierarchical labor systems. Indigenous relational culture and pre-colonial social norms can be identified by tracing the human nervous system's needs for connection, coregulation and collective identity, but Western individualism ignores the collective, multidimensional being that humans initially evolved as.

When anthropologists first encountered the Yanomamo tribe, they thought their relational, multilayered cosmology primitive and uneducated. But what if their spiritual knowledge was more advanced than the invading colonizer was able to understand? Instead of identifying the self as their bodies, the Yanomamo refer to the body as a house, one where

multiple spirit or consciousnesses dwell at once. In Carl Jung's analytical psychology, the individuated Self acts as a container for the spirit by integrating both personal and transpersonal archetypal elements of the psyche, which could be understood as similar to the Yanomamo's spirits (Schmidt; Chagnon, 1968). Abraham Maslow studied Indigenous peoples, particularly the Blackfoot Nation (Siksika Nation) in 1938, and this significantly influenced his Hierarchy of Needs theory. Critics and indigenous scholars argue that Maslow's model as grouped in a top-down hierarchy misrepresents Indigenous people's worldviews by framing human development as a linear and hierarchical, individualistic pyramid, rather than the collective, interconnected, and circular way of being that is central to Blackfoot philosophy (Abedi, 2025). Put in simple terms, Maslow's model doesn't mention what our ancestors knew as the final step of human maturation beyond self-actualization, where the self realizes its identity as a multiplicity, rather than just a single point. Seeing everyone else, and all of existence, as a reflection of one's own inner state of being. The ego, and illusory sense of an individual self and personal identity is therefore a normal stage of human development, but as the final stopping point and measurement of maturity, is a Western colonial cultural artifact that was not shared by the indigenous collectivist cultures that humans evolved from. By withholding information of humanity's identity as a spiritual collective, and by removing collective relational identity from Maslow's model of needs, the West's citizens are suspended in a state of perpetual adolescence, never fully maturing as the collective species the discordance hypothesis indicates that humans were for 90% of their history. This delay in species-wide social and emotional maturation, despite human nervous systems having evolved for collective relationality, indicates that colonization, individual identity and Western civilization are not naturally occurring constructs. Takiwātanga, a Māori term for autism, means to be in one's own time or space, which indicates autism as an evolutionary norm or advantage that is currently clashing with imposed colonial constructs. Rather than humans being a mismatch with modern culture, autism being defined by social deficits conversely indicates that modern individualist colonial culture is a relational mismatch for all human nervous systems, and this discordance arises as a result of capitalism's systemic stunting the growth of individual "I"'s into a collective "We."

From a genetic standpoint, recent research indicates that some traits linked to autism are influenced by Neanderthal-derived DNA, including heightened focus and other adaptive skills (Meyer, Chen, & Thompson, 2024). These ancient adaptations point to the ways that modern culture conflicts with human biological structures, such as the human polyvagal nervous system, which evolved for collective co-regulatory practices. I have also previously observed that “We cannot effectively evaluate autism without situating it within a broader historical lens that accounts for both evolutionary and colonial forces. Traits associated with autism must be understood not only as remnants of adaptations from hunter-gatherer societies, but also as shaped by the violent disruptions of colonization. The history of interbreeding, sexual violence, and forced marriages between colonizing populations and Indigenous peoples produced not only a mingling of genetic lineages, but also a profound clash of cultural frameworks. On one side stood relational, interdependent worldviews rooted in ecological balance and biological evolution, and on the other, hierarchical, extractive systems that sought to dominate and assimilate. Autism, when viewed through this lens, embodies the tensions between these worlds with its traits resonating with the evolutionary strengths of our hunter-gatherer past while being pathologized under the rigid, colonizer-defined social norms of modernity. Thus, autism cannot be fully understood as either a purely biological condition or a social construct in isolation; it must be recognized as a site of historical and cultural collision, carrying within it both the resilience of ancient adaptations and the wounds of colonial disruption” (Snow, 2025). Autism’s genetic links in humanity’s evolutionary past expose the colonial project’s history of genocide through forced interbreeding with indigenous populations, which cannot be ignored when attempting to establish autism’s origins or cause.

Human brains have evolved to balance social cohesion with analytical focus, but autism reflects a functional compromise between enhanced systemizing and pattern recognition often accompanied by reduced social reciprocity. These traits that appear abnormal in modern environments may have been advantageous in the past, which would explain their longevity and persistence throughout Western recorded history. Autism also represents the evolutionary legacy of cognitive diversity, because traits associated with autism such as the ability to recognize

patterns may have been vital to the survival of early human groups, increasing collective adaptability. Today colonial and capitalist systems re-frame these traits as deficits, but historically, this has not always been the case; autism's cognitive diversity and ability to maintain multidimensional modes of thought currently contrast with capitalism's conformist and binary system.

In conclusion, autism can be explained through all six categories of evolutionary medicine. It is simultaneously a defense, a product of immune-pathogen dynamics, a mismatch with modern environments, a genetic trade-off, a functional compromise, and an evolutionary legacy. A biocultural perspective reveals that while autism's biological roots are ancient, its framing as a "disorder" is socially constructed through colonial and capitalist systems. As opposed to being a separate identity or category, autism, in being defined as socially deficient by Western colonial standards, indicates a collective and relational social identity which our nervous system correlates, and indigenous belief systems also corroborate. Autism is not a defect, but instead reflects evolutionary adaptations that clash with modern colonial cultural constructs and social norms. Where Western pathology codifies autism as a specific categorical difference and deficit, through a decolonial lens, autism is actually a normal variation of human genetics that likely relates to the historical intermingling of indigenous hunter-gatherer DNA with invasive non-native genetics, but outside of a colonial context, autistic traits would be considered normal or even seen as evolutionary advantages. Autism's social deficits, when evaluated using the discordance hypothesis, reveals capitalism and modern civilization's discordance with humanity's historical social structures and corresponding biological evolution.

The Biocultural and Evolutionary Framing of Autism

The biocultural approach to health offers a powerful framework for understanding complex conditions like autism, arguing that human well-being is a product of intertwined biological, social, and cultural factors. This perspective refutes the idea that health can be understood by separating biology from environment, instead viewing them as an integrated system. For instance, a study on malaria in Sardinia showed that while the disease has a clear biological basis, its risk and prevalence were heavily influenced by cultural and social factors such as settlement patterns, land use, and social organization that limited exposure for women, children, and elite classes (Hurtado, 2024). This essay will extend this biocultural model to argue that while biological causes of autism may be linked to our evolutionary past, the framing of autism as a “disorder” is a colonial and capitalist construct.

A key biological factor for understanding modern health is the discordance hypothesis, which highlights the mismatch between our ancestral and modern environments. The provided sources show that helminths (parasitic worms) have been an essential feature of human disease ecologies throughout history, exerting strong selective pressures on our physiological and immunological phenotypes. This is supported by the fact that nonhuman primates, prehistoric populations, and contemporary indigenous groups, whose environments most closely resemble our past, exhibit very high rates of helminth infections. The human immune system, therefore, has evolved to function in an environment “full of microbes and parasites” (Nesse, 2009). This historical relationship with helminths is crucial because it has implications for the current rise in inflammatory diseases, including autism.

The New York Times article “An Immune Disorder at the Root of Autism” posits that at least a subset of autism appears to be an inflammatory disease that begins in the womb (Grinker, 2012). The article notes that a mother’s inflammatory response, rather than the infection itself, seems to be at fault. The article quotes William Parker at Duke University, who suggests that the immune system we consider normal is actually

an “evolutionary aberration.” He argues for a “pre-emptive restoration of ‘domesticated’ parasites in everybody” as an “ecosystem restoration project” to correct the “wayward, postmodern immune system.” The article mentions a trial underway at the Montefiore Medical Center and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine testing a medicalized parasite, *Trichuris suis*, in autistic adults. This connects to the discordance hypothesis by highlighting that for 90% of human history, humans were hunter-gatherers with helminths, and that modern civilization’s sanitation practices have disrupted this “human superorganism” (Nesse, 2009).

However, the framing of autism as a disorder must also be understood as a colonial concept. As @Staya_Stray (2025) on Twitter emphasizes, conditions like autism, ADHD, and ADD are only “disorders” under capitalism, where their traits are recoded as maladaptive because they conflict with hierarchical labor systems and normative standards of productivity. In traditional hunter-gatherer societies, the concept of autism did not exist, and many of their pathologized traits would have been seen as strengths. New research suggests some characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorder may be partially influenced by DNA inherited from Neanderthals tens of thousands of years ago. Researchers from Clemson and Loyola Universities analyzed whole-genome data and found that certain Neanderthal-derived variants appear more often in autistic individuals (Meyer et al., 2024). These findings suggest that some traits now recognized in autism may trace back to ancient adaptations, where abilities like heightened focus, pattern recognition, or tool-making could have been valuable for survival. Given the evolutionary co-existence of helminths and our ancestors, it is reasonable to theorize whether Autistics, due to their Neanderthal DNA, could be more sensitive to the lack of helminths in our modern environment, further linking the work of Hurtado (2024) and the New York Times article (Grinker, 2012).

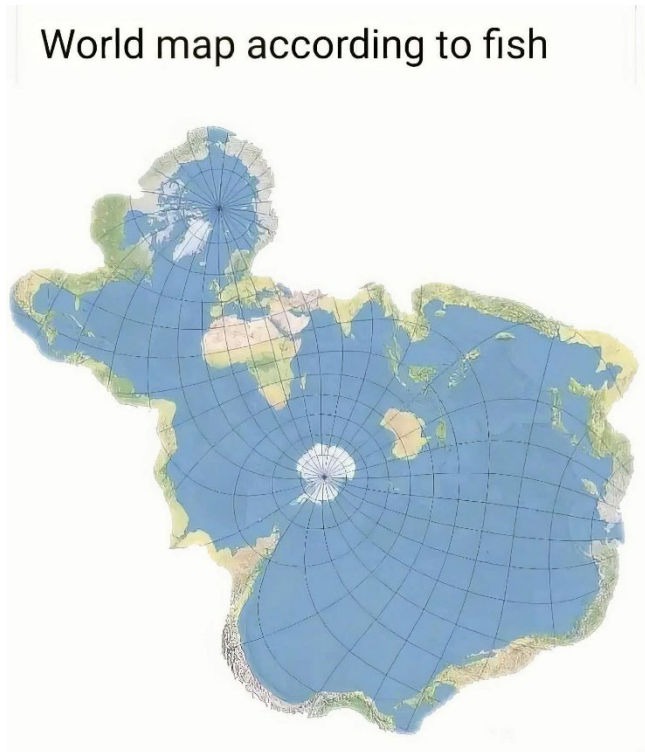
Regardless of whether parasites, or the absence of them, directly cause autism, their deep interdependence with human history and evolution strongly supports the discordance hypothesis. This perspective highlights how our immune systems, nervous systems, and even aspects of our cognition evolved in environments shaped by constant microbial and parasitic exposure, alongside social structures rooted in small-scale hunter-gatherer societies. The persistence of Neanderthal-derived DNA associated with traits now labeled as “autistic” in medical literature and

research suggests these adaptations were advantageous in contexts that valued focus, pattern recognition, and relational memory tied to survival tasks. Today, however, these same evolutionary legacies collide with modern social norms and capitalist structures that demand conformity, rapid adaptation, and standardized productivity. This tension underscores how autism is less a pathology than a reflection of evolutionary divergence, revealing a mismatch between bodies and minds adapted for interdependence in ecological communities and the alienation produced by contemporary society.

We cannot effectively evaluate autism without situating it within a broader historical lens that accounts for both evolutionary and colonial forces. Traits associated with autism must be understood not only as remnants of adaptations from hunter-gatherer societies, but also as shaped by the violent disruptions of colonization. The history of interbreeding, sexual violence, and forced marriages between colonizing populations and Indigenous peoples produced not only a mingling of genetic lineages, but also a profound clash of cultural frameworks. On one side stood relational, interdependent worldviews rooted in ecological balance and biological evolution, and on the other, hierarchical, extractive systems that sought to dominate and assimilate. Autism, when viewed through this lens, embodies the tensions between these worlds with its traits resonating with the evolutionary strengths of our hunter-gatherer past while being pathologized under the rigid, colonizer-defined social norms of modernity. Thus, autism cannot be fully understood as either a purely biological condition or a social construct in isolation; it must be recognized as a site of historical and cultural collision, carrying within it both the resilience of ancient adaptations and the wounds of colonial disruption.

In conclusion, a biocultural approach reveals that autism is a complex phenomenon shaped by the interplay of deep evolutionary history and modern social conditions. The biological causes of autism may be rooted in an evolutionary mismatch, particularly the absence of parasites that once regulated our immune systems. However, a critical perspective reveals that the classification of autism as a “disorder” is not a biological fact but a social construct defined by the demands of modern civilization. Traits that were once adaptive strengths in our hunter-gatherer past have become pathologized due to their conflict with capitalist labor systems.

Therefore, any biological theorizing about the causes of autism must be accompanied by a critical reframing that recognizes autism as a colonial concept.



Autism as a Cultural Mirror: Cognition, Schema, and Healing Across Worlds

Autism, often pathologized in Western biomedicine as a neurological disorder, can also be understood as a distinct mode of perception and meaning-making that exposes the cultural foundations of cognition itself. Through Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, Schema Theory, and Kleinman's framework of illness as cultural construction, autism can be reinterpreted not as a deficit but as a culturally divergent expression of human intelligence. When placed alongside cross-cultural models of healing, autism reveals how societies encode, express, and repair disconnection, whether neural, social, or spiritual, through culturally specific systems of cognition and care.

Vygotsky's theory of social development holds that all higher mental functions originate in social interaction before being internalized as individual thought. Learning occurs within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where meaning is co-constructed through guided participation (Vygotsky, 1978; Crawford, 1996). From this perspective, autistic cognition may not represent an absence of sociality but rather an alternate pathway for internalization that relies less on linguistic mediation and more on sensory and pattern-based attunement. Vygotsky's emphasis on the tools of culture such as language, symbols, and shared practices illustrates how neurotypical societies privilege verbal reciprocity as the basis of intelligence. Autistic perception, by contrast, reveals what cognition looks like when such tools are configured differently: when thinking emerges directly from embodied, relational, and often nonverbal exchanges with the environment.

Schema Theory complements this view by framing cognition as the organization of knowledge through mental models, or schemas, that guide perception and behavior (Bartlett, 1932; Piaget, 1952). These schemas are not universal but culturally acquired, shaped by early interactions and shared meanings. The autistic mind may resist or reconfigure dominant schemas, favoring literal, associative, or system-based

mappings rather than socially conventional ones. In a culture that rewards rapid inferencing, abstract language, and hierarchical communication, autistic cognition exposes how “normality” itself is a learned schema. Just as anthropologists study cultural models of illness to understand how societies construct sickness, autism forces modern psychology to confront how it constructs normalcy. The “deficits” often attributed to autism, such as differences in theory of mind, pragmatics, or empathy, may instead reflect schema incongruence between autistic individuals and neurotypical social environments.

Kleinman, Eisenberg, and Good’s (1978) distinction between disease and illness further clarifies this. Disease is the biomedical malfunction of the body, whereas illness is the lived, socially mediated experience of suffering. Autism, in this light, is less a disease than a culturally produced illness category that emerges at the intersection of neurological variation and societal intolerance for divergent relational styles. Just as Kleinman argued that physicians must negotiate between patient and doctor explanatory models, autism invites a negotiation between neurotypical and neurodivergent models of social reality. The failure of such negotiation underlies much of the alienation autistic people experience: a breakdown not of empathy but of translation. The autistic individual and the neurotypical world inhabit distinct cultural schemas of communication and belonging, and healing lies in the creation of a shared, hybrid model that validates both.

Anthropological examples from outside the West illuminate what such hybridization might look like. In southern Tanzania, modern traditional healers blend biomedical practice with ancestral ritual, embodying a hybrid epistemology that bridges scientific and spiritual systems of knowledge (Langwick, 2007). Their authority stems not from rejecting either system but from mediating between them, translating across explanatory models much as clinicians must when engaging with patients’ cultural worlds. Similarly, among the Kung of the Kalahari, the healing dance dissolves boundaries between self and other, body and spirit, healer and patient. Through rhythmic entrainment, shared emotion, and collective trance, the community regulates its collective nervous system, a process analogous to what Western psychology would describe as co-regulation (Katz, 1982). The energy that rises during the dance, painful yet transformative, parallels the autistic experience of

sensory intensity as an embodied pathway to connection and transcendence when contained by communal structure rather than pathologized in isolation.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal autism as both a neurological variation and a cultural mirror that reflects the relational fractures of modernity. Western medicine's fragmentation of mind, body, and community mirrors the fragmentation autistic individuals are often accused of embodying. Yet in cultures that maintain integrated frameworks of healing, where emotion, ritual, and relationship form a continuous field, the traits associated with autism may function differently, even adaptively. Vygotsky's social constructivism, Schema Theory's cultural cognition, and Kleinman's medical anthropology converge to suggest that healing is not merely the correction of a disordered brain but the restoration of relational resonance between individuals and their cultural worlds. Autism, viewed through this lens, is not a deviation from humanity's design but a reminder of its diversity: a living proof that cognition, like culture itself, is plural, relational, and in constant negotiation with the world.

Let There Be Peace On Earth, And Let It Begin With Me

Key Terms:

Collective consciousness (Émile Durkheim)

The shared set of beliefs, morals, and attitudes that acts as a unifying force within a society. Think of it as the “cultural glue” that connects people or the mental and moral values most members agree on, often without realizing it.

Collective unconscious (Carl Jung)

A deeper layer beneath personal awareness that all humans share, containing universal symbols, instincts, and archetypes. It’s like a shared storage of human memories and patterns that influence behavior and dreams, even if we’ve never personally experienced them.

Bifurcation of consciousness (Dorothy E. Smith)

A split in awareness where a person experiences two realities at once, both the dominant “public” reality and their own personal or marginalized experience of the world. Often described in feminist sociology and disability studies, it can happen when someone has to adapt to one worldview while living another.

Double empathy problem (Damian E. Milton)

A communication gap that happens between autistic and non-autistic people. It’s not just autistic people struggling to understand non-autistics, both groups can misunderstand each other equally, because they process social cues differently.

Shadow (Carl Jung)

The hidden or rejected parts of ourselves such as traits, emotions, or impulses we deny or repress. These often show up in the people or behaviors we dislike the most, which is why Jung said we sometimes meet our shadow “in others.”

Mirror neurons

Brain cells that fire both when you do something and when you watch someone else do it. They help you “feel” what others are experiencing, and are thought to be important for empathy and social connection.

Social Mirror theory (Charles Whitehead)

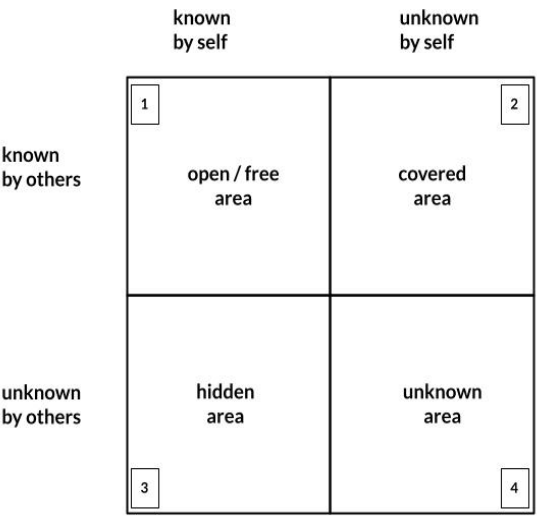
The idea that we understand ourselves through how others reflect us back. Our identity is partly built by seeing ourselves “mirrored” in the reactions, words, and behaviors of other people

Mirroring hypothesis (Colfer & Baldwin)

In organizations, this suggests that the way a technical system is designed will be reflected in the structure of the organization that uses it, almost like the blueprint of one shapes the blueprint of the other.

Johari window

A self-awareness tool that uses four quadrants to map what is known to ourselves, what others know about us, what is hidden from both, and what is unknown. It’s used in communication training to improve openness and understanding.

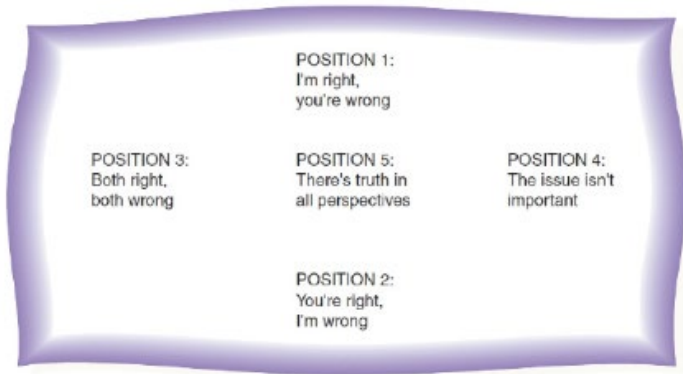


Paradox of tolerance (Karl Popper)

The idea that a completely tolerant society must be intolerant of intolerance, otherwise, intolerant forces will destroy tolerance itself.

Pillow Method

A perspective-taking exercise from Japanese education that has four “sides” (each representing a different viewpoint) and a “middle” (where all perspectives are valid). It helps people step outside their own position to understand others.



Let There Be Peace On Earth

Let there be peace on earth

And let it begin with me.

Let there be peace on earth

The peace that was meant to be.

With Earth as our mother

Family, all are we.

Let us walk with each other

In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me,

Let this be the moment now.

With ev'ry step I take

Let this be my solemn vow;

To take each moment and live

Each moment in peace eternally.

Let there be peace on earth

And let it begin with me.

by Jill Jackson-Miller and Sy Miller in 195

My mother died seven years ago in 2018, but sometimes I can still hear her voice singing “Let There Be Peace On Earth” as if she was belting it from her seat next to me at the Church of Religious Science Sunday services back in 1995. She loved to sing and had amazing pitch, strong lungs and an ear for harmony. Mom had never been particularly religious during my childhood until hitting rock bottom and finding God when she got sober during my teenage years, which was when she started dragging us to church with her, if you could even call it that. The nearly abandoned strip mall hosted several aging or abandoned storefronts. Every Sunday we would walk by a tired looking comic book store and a row of papered-over windows before entering a door next to curtains hung behind a window that was painted in a modern V shaped logo display, with two lines behind the V and a circle around it.

The small room wasn't what first came to my mind when she first told us we were going to go to church. I didn't see any cross on the wall, just some cheap floral arrangements and a few tapestry wall hangings

with nature designs. Instead of pews, there were chairs arranged in rows facing a small stage, where a very enthusiastic and bubbly middle-aged gentleman strummed his acoustic guitar while the gathering of people all sang together. Then a woman would get up and give a speech about the power of positive thinking, love, personal responsibility and the importance of following universal laws. Sometimes we would have a group activity that involved some sort of art therapy, like making collages or writing poetry or painting. There would be more singing, and they would always close and end service by singing *Let There Be Peace On Earth*. This was my experience attending the Church of Religious Science.

Religious Science, also known as the Science of Mind, is a spiritual movement founded by Ernest Holmes, who wrote the book *The Science of Mind* in 1926. His work referenced the teachings of Jesus Christ, Buddha, and the Bible. It combines the power of prayer with mindfulness and meditation, and in doing so it emphasizes that one's thoughts and beliefs shape one's reality. The teachings focus on the interconnectedness of all things through a Universal Mind or shared consciousness and that everything is made up of that consciousness, which is remarkable given the fact that quantum mechanics and similar theories of shared consciousness didn't become popular with scientific studies until the later half of the 20th century.

As a teenager, the deeper philosophical aspects of the group's theology didn't make much sense to me, and neither did my mother's spiritual awakening or her relationship with a so-called higher power. What did leave an impression on me was the immense amount of emotional pain my mother seemed to be in, and how desperate she seemed to be relieved of it. I went to support her in her recovery, though I didn't get much choice in the matter. She stopped going to AA meetings, went back to drinking and didn't take me to church services. She lost faith after a few years, and she didn't talk about God or sing about Peace on Earth anymore. But I never forgot the underlying message, or the sound of her voice clinging desperately to that hope.

A popular quote found online that has been attributed to multiple people says "we cannot force someone to hear a message they are not ready to receive, but we must never underestimate the power of planting a seed." Barry H. Gillespie has said that "the path isn't a straight line; it's

a spiral. You continually come back to things you thought you understood and see deeper truths.” Leonardo daVinci said” realize that everything connects with everything else.” Seven years ago, when my mother died, I had my own spiritual awakening and suddenly the Religious Science messages started making a lot more sense. The world came to a standstill for me when she passed, yet life carried on like normal for everyone else, leaving me with the sense that I was trapped between two dimensions of reality.

Through a series of synchronicities and coincidences, I began to feel like the external world outside of me was reflecting my current internal state. When people spoke to me, I was given a very clear sense that there was a higher consciousness beyond their own awareness that was talking through them to me. But my grief-stricken brain was frozen in time and couldn’t process what was happening or recall the lessons from the Church of Religious Science that I’d been exposed to in my teens. I became paranoid and developed spiritual psychosis, which is referred to as a condition where individuals struggle to distinguish objective reality from their spiritual beliefs. In my case I didn’t really have any prior beliefs but was attempting to understand and explain the phenomenon I was already experiencing but I was only able to define it in spiritual terms. Some accounts and studies of Inuit shaman initiation involve extreme physical and psychological challenges similar to the trauma that I went through in order to cultivate a deeper connection with the spirit world and their own inner landscape. In *The Making of a Shaman*, Robert Walsh recounts the case of an Inuit hunter named “Kehuq,” who, as part of his initiation, underwent what can only be described as a psychic ordeal. He suffered intense psychological disturbances: days of confusion, hallucinations, and disintegration of his ordinary sense of self, before eventually emerging with the ability to traverse the spirit realms and serve as a mediator between the human and spirit worlds (Walsh, 1994). This “break-up” of the personality is characteristic of many shamanic initiatory crises, in which one must first be dismantled and disoriented before being reassembled with access to deeper vision. I certainly feel like some light got in through my cracks.

I wish I had a guide or mentor at that time who could have put what I was experiencing in terms that I could understand, because then maybe I wouldn’t have been so scared. If I had a mentor, they could have told

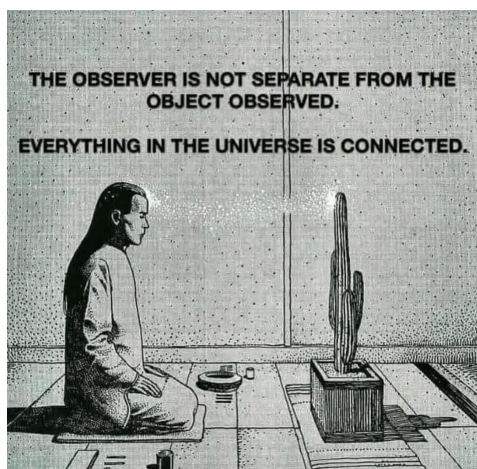
me that collective consciousness refers to beliefs and sentiments common to average members of society, forming a determinate system that has its own life. This term was first coined by Émile Durkheim and later further developed by Carl Jung, who also “proposed that the collective unconscious lies beneath this layer of shared consciousness (Meridian University, 2023).” What I’ve come to realize after several years of being stuck in fight or flight and paralyzed with fear is that experiencing multiple dimensions of reality at once for an extended amount of time essentially split my consciousness, which allowed me to interact directly with the collective unconscious itself. I had to go back to college after I’d gotten stable again before I was able to put these pieces together and fully understand what had happened to me.

Oxford languages define the word mystic as “a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect (2025).” I would personally define my spiritual awakening as a mystical experience, one where the interconnectedness of all things through a Universal Mind or shared consciousness becomes directly evident. In my case, it turned into psychosis because I couldn’t trust people and was afraid of them. However, I believe that autistic individuals like myself may be capable of accessing this truth of universal consciousness easier than neurotypicals due to already being forced in their daily lives to navigate two different realities, leading to a bifurcation of consciousness.

The Maori word for autism is “takiwatanga,” meaning “in his/her own time and space.” I’ve recently begun to wonder if perhaps the term neurotypical might simply refer to an inability to split one’s awareness with and experience this shared mind. This would imply that neurodivergent thinking could be defined as one who is forced to separate the reality from which they must adapt to from the reality of the world as they experience it, experiencing bifurcation of consciousness (Balazan, 2018). This bifurcation arises as a result of cognitive dissonance between the dominant narrative controlled by neurotypicals and marginalized groups, meaning that it is a problem that is created by the in-group’s own lack of understanding of the out-groups differences (Milton’s double empathy problem), which the dominant group then persecutes and gaslights the

marginalized groups for even though it is their own lack of understanding that causes the issue to arise in the first place.

When I was experiencing spiritual psychosis, I lashed out in anger at everyone close to me and eventually self-isolated because the collective unconscious seemed incredibly narcissistic. Everyone seemed to lack empathy for what I was experiencing and disregarded my feelings. I felt coerced and manipulated by people. I was consistently devalued, and no one was able to take accountability for the ways their actions impacted me. I felt criticized and judged. Carl Jung has linked narcissism to the “shadow,” which is the unintegrated parts of the personality containing repressed traits. If the Science of the Mind is true and everything is made up of that singular consciousness, then my “mystical experience” speaking to the collective unconscious was actually me just arguing with and being afraid of my own shadow. And since we all share the same consciousness, that also means that everyone is a bit narcissistic. My paranoia and heightened fear eventually caused me to reach a state of egoic collapse where my self-image broke down, causing me a significant amount of emotional distress before I was able to see myself clearly in others and acknowledge how my actions had impacted them.



Mirror neurons are brain cells that activate when an individual observes someone else performing an action that they themselves then enact. This mirroring process is thought to be fundamental to empathy, allowing us

to understand and share the experiences and emotions of others. Social Mirror theory suggests that people cannot fully understand themselves without considering others' interpretations of their experiences and emphasizes the importance of social interaction and mimicry in shaping self-reflection and personal growth (Whitehead, 2001). In organizational design, the mirroring hypothesis posits that there is a structural correspondence between a technical system and the organizational structure that develops or maintains it, which is very similar to Jung's ideas about how an individual and the collective consciousness and unconsciousness operate as a networked feedback loop. Based on this information and my direct experience of the shared mind I have developed what I call Mirror Integration Theory (MIT), which is a form of self-inquiry that uses input gained socially to integrate parts of the shadow that would remain otherwise unseen.

Imagine an organization that builds software (the "technical system"). The mirroring hypothesis suggests that the team structure, communication channels, and even the power dynamics within that organization will tend to mirror the architecture of the software they are building.

- Example: If the software is designed in a highly modular way, with independent components, the organization might develop autonomous, cross-functional teams that each own a specific module. Conversely, if the software is a monolithic, tightly coupled system, the organization might have a more hierarchical structure with many interdependencies and approvals required between departments.

The idea is that the internal workings of the organization become a reflection of the thing it's creating or maintaining. It's difficult for a loosely structured, agile team to effectively build and maintain a rigid, highly centralized system, and vice versa.

Jung's ideas offer a parallel on a much broader, psychological scale:

- individual Consciousness: This is your personal awareness, thoughts, and experiences.
- Collective Consciousness: This refers to the shared beliefs, morals, and attitudes that unify a society (Durkheim's concept).

- **Collective Unconscious:** This is a deeper, inherited layer of universal patterns, archetypes, and instincts that all humans share, influencing behavior and dreams without conscious awareness.

Jung's "networked feedback loop" suggests that these levels are constantly influencing each other:

- **Individual to Collective:** An individual's actions, beliefs, and emotional states contribute to the overall collective consciousness and can even tap into or be shaped by the collective unconscious. If many individuals experience a similar trauma, for instance, it can become part of a collective "shadow" or shared emotional landscape.
- **Collective to Individual:** The collective (society, culture) in turn shapes the individual. Social norms, historical traumas, and archetypal narratives embedded in the collective unconscious influence how individuals perceive the world, regulate their emotions, and construct their identity.

The similarity lies in the idea of structural correspondence and mutual influence.

- In organizational design, the structure of the technical system (product) mirrors and influences the organizational structure (team/company).
- In Jungian thought, the structure of the individual psyche mirrors and influences the broader collective psyche (society/humanity), and vice-versa, creating a dynamic feedback loop.

Both concepts highlight that what happens "internally" (within the system or the individual/collective psyche) has a profound and often reciprocal relationship with what manifests "externally" (the organizational structure or societal norms and behaviors). Just as a dysfunctional software architecture can lead to a dysfunctional organization, unintegrated aspects of the collective unconscious can manifest as societal dysfunctions, influencing individual psyches.

MIT also draws from the Johari window, a psychological concept that helps individuals gain self-awareness and enhance their interpersonal relationships through a four-quadrant grid, but instead of seeing others as

separate from oneself, MIT expands our awareness by seeing everyone as a reflection of our own self, and uses internal feedback (“triggers”) to identify unintegrated parts, in order to improve our relationships with our self and others. This theory reframes “toxic” individuals as people who are reflecting unintegrated parts of our shadow back at us, and exposes Karl Popper’s Paradox of Tolerance as being founded on a fallacy (the belief that our consciousness is separate from others). It’s actually impossible to be irritated or upset by something that is not also within ourselves. Although an external event might be the catalyst, the internal interpretation and emotional response is what leads to the feeling of being triggered. The event itself or other people themselves don't hold that power; rather, the brain's assessment of the situation, based on past experiences and beliefs, generates an intense emotional reaction.

Princeton neuroscientist Michael Graziano is developing a theory of consciousness based on the idea that awareness is a "description" the brain constructs of itself and others. His Attention Schema Theory suggests that just as the brain builds internal models of the body to guide movement, it also constructs an internal model of attention to track and predict mental states. This model is simplified and schematic, which explains why consciousness feels ineffable and non-physical even though it arises from neural processes. By framing awareness as the brain’s self-generated narrative, Graziano argues that consciousness is not a mystical property but an adaptive mechanism for social cognition and self-regulation. The brain's ability to attribute awareness to others is seen as a foundation for attributing awareness to itself. The Pillow Method (“there is truth in all perspectives”), used by Japanese schoolchildren and introduced by writer Paul Reps (Adler & Proctor, 2011, p. 110)., is a communication technique designed to increase awareness and to foster empathy by encouraging individuals to consider multiple perspectives of a conflict or issue, similar to how a pillow has four sides and a middle. It helps individuals move beyond their own viewpoint to understand others' positions, ultimately promoting better communication and understanding. Training children in perspective taking by utilizing techniques like the Pillow Method alongside MIT could potentially help to address the double empathy problem by intentionally inducing bifurcation of consciousness in neurotypicals, leading to less conflict and increased social awareness in our society.

People often react defensively or aggressively when “triggered,” blaming others for their feelings. This leads to conflict, broken relationships, and polarization. Traditional self-awareness models like the Johari Window treat others as separate from ourselves, which can limit how deeply we integrate uncomfortable feedback. Mirror Integration Theory reframes others, including those we see as “toxic” as reflections of our own unintegrated shadow. By using social interactions as mirrors, and seeing triggers as clues to hidden parts of the self, MIT turns conflict into an opportunity for self-inquiry and personal growth. This approach expands on the Johari Window by assuming a shared consciousness, helping individuals integrate shadow traits, increase empathy, and resolve interpersonal tension at its root.

For instance, imagine a couple where one partner has an avoidant attachment style and the other an anxious attachment style. The avoidant partner tends to withdraw when stressed, while the anxious partner seeks closeness and reassurance. This dynamic often leads to conflict: the more one withdraws, the more the other pursues. Through the lens of Mirror Integration Theory (MIT), each partner uses the interaction as a mirror. The anxious partner sees their trigger such as a fear of abandonment as a reflection of their own unintegrated shadow trait of insecurity. The avoidant partner recognizes their trigger, feeling smothered, as a clue to their hidden fear of vulnerability. Instead of repeating the cycle, both partners pause to inquire into these reactions, integrating the parts of themselves they usually reject. By doing so, they cultivate empathy for one another’s wounds and shift the relationship from a cycle of tension into a space of mutual growth and healing.

On the policy and international sphere, the same avoidant–anxious dynamic often plays out between nations. An “avoidant” country may value sovereignty, independence, and minimal interference, pulling away from collective agreements when feeling pressured. An “anxious” country, by contrast, may seek constant reassurance through treaties, alliances, and interventions, fearing abandonment or irrelevance if others do not engage. This dynamic can fuel cycles of mistrust and escalation: the more one side withdraws, the more the other presses for connection, often intensifying conflict. Applied through Mirror Integration Theory (MIT), such tensions are reframed as opportunities for collective self-inquiry rather than zero-sum struggles. International triggers such as

disputes over borders, trade, or security become mirrors of deeper shadow traits like fear of vulnerability, dependency, or loss of identity. Just as in interpersonal dynamics, policy leaders can use these moments to integrate hidden national insecurities and foster empathy across divides. For instance, global institutions could encourage dialogue that acknowledges both the avoidant need for autonomy and the anxious need for connection, creating frameworks that allow nations to feel both respected and supported. In this way, MIT provides a lens to resolve conflicts at their root, helping transform cycles of coercion and mistrust into cooperative growth on a global scale.

Let's take U.S.–China relations as a case study framed through the avoidant–anxious attachment model. The United States often displays “anxious” tendencies in its foreign policy, seeking to maintain influence, monitor rising powers, and secure reassurance through military alliances and trade agreements. China, on the other hand, frequently exhibits “avoidant” traits, emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and resistance to what it perceives as intrusive demands from outside powers. When the U.S. presses for transparency on trade practices or human rights, China tends to withdraw or become defensive. When China pulls back, the U.S. doubles down, increasing pressure through sanctions, surveillance, or diplomatic campaigns. This creates a familiar feedback loop where each side's strategy reinforces the other's fears and the anxious side feels abandoned, while the avoidant side feels suffocated. Through Mirror Integration Theory (MIT), this cycle can be reframed. The U.S. can recognize that its drive for reassurance reflects a deeper shadow trait, fear of losing dominance and identity in a shifting global order. China, in turn, can see that its avoidance signals a hidden fear of vulnerability and exposure. By bringing these unconscious patterns to light, MIT would encourage international leaders to design policies that integrate both needs: agreements that respect sovereignty while fostering trust, transparency, and collaboration. Instead of escalating mistrust, the relationship could shift toward mutual growth, transforming conflict into an opportunity for collective integration, just as in interpersonal healing.

NATO often takes on the “anxious” role, seeking reassurance through expanded membership, military exercises, and collective defense postures. This stems from fears of abandonment among smaller member states and from the West's deeper concern with preserving unity and

stability in the face of perceived threats. Russia, by contrast, embodies an “avoidant” stance, highly protective of its sovereignty and sphere of influence, interpreting NATO’s attempts at closeness as intrusive or coercive. Each NATO expansion or military maneuver triggers Russia’s avoidance response, leading it to withdraw diplomatically or escalate militarily. In turn, Russia’s withdrawal and aggression trigger NATO’s anxious pursuit of even tighter integration and deterrence, perpetuating the cycle of mistrust. Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) reframes this tension as an opportunity for collective self-inquiry. NATO’s anxious strategies reveal a shadow fear of fragmentation and loss of control, while Russia’s avoidant defensiveness points to a shadow fear of vulnerability and diminished status. By treating these triggers as mirrors rather than threats, leaders could design new frameworks that validate both autonomy and connection. For example, policies could emphasize transparent communication, shared security initiatives not framed as dominance, and forums where sovereignty is respected alongside cooperative trust-building. This would not erase conflict, but it could transform the cycle of coercion into a process of integration, helping both NATO and Russia move from reactive posturing to relational repair.

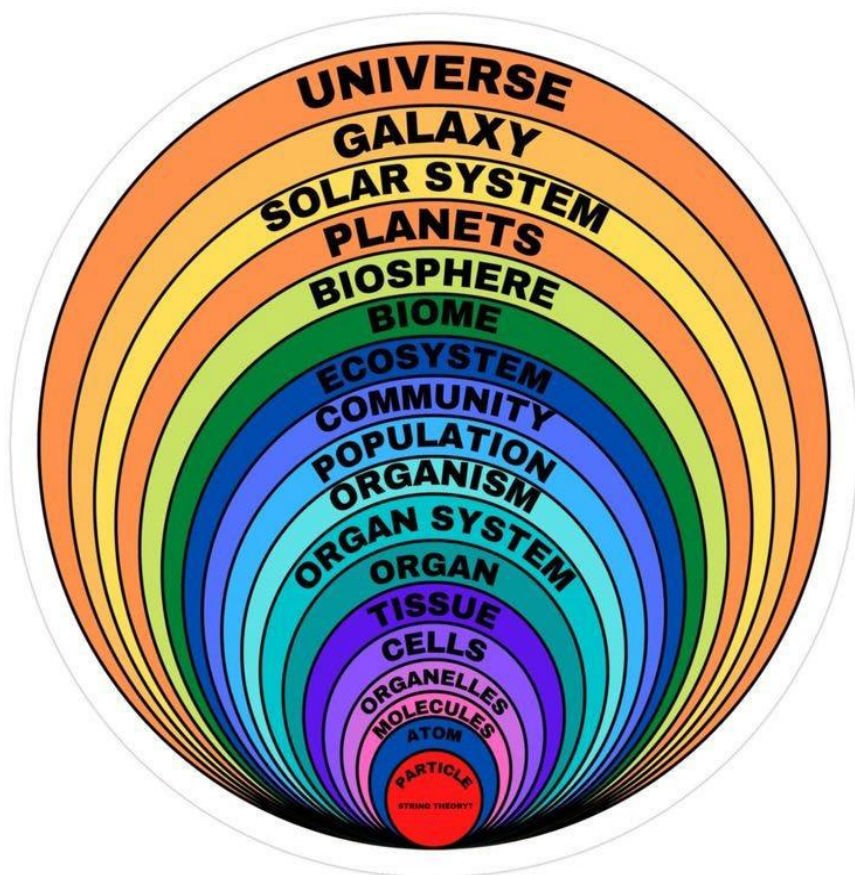
Problem:

When people encounter behavior in others that provokes discomfort, anger, or judgment, the common tendency is to externalize blame. This reactive pattern creates interpersonal conflict, entrenches divisions, and prevents deeper self-understanding. Models like the Johari Window help map self-awareness but still position others as external agents, which can obscure the shared dynamics that fuel tension.

Solution:

Mirror Integration Theory reframes all interpersonal encounters, especially those that trigger strong reactions, as reflective opportunities to recognize unacknowledged or “shadow” aspects of the self. By viewing others as mirrors rather than separate entities, MIT turns conflict into a tool for integration and growth. This perspective extends beyond traditional self-awareness models by assuming a connected consciousness, enabling individuals to transform triggers into insights, deepen empathy, and foster more authentic relationships.

...Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.



The Eight Features of Autistic Standpoint Theory: A Framework for Reclaiming Voice, Identity, and Relational Knowledge

A version of this essay was submitted to *Ought*, The Journal of Autistic Culture, with Co-author Christopher Cosby from Oregon State University.

Autistic Standpoint Theory is an emergent framework grounded in the lived experiences, epistemologies, and cultural positions of autistic individuals. Like its feminist and decolonial predecessors, it recognizes that knowledge is never neutral, it is socially situated, historically constructed, and deeply entangled with systems of power. Drawing inspiration from Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* and Dorothy E. Smith's *Institutional Ethnography*, Autistic Standpoint Theory offers a way to understand the social realities of autism outside of the deficit-based gaze of dominant psychology and through the vantage point of those who actually live it. It is not merely a critique of how autism is pathologized, but a reframing of autism as a valid cultural and cognitive orientation in a society that has been built on conformity, dualism, and surveillance. Below, I elaborate on the eight distinguishing features of this standpoint as outlined in my introduction, each one a lens through which we can examine the structural, relational, and cultural significance of autistic experience.

1. The Contradiction Between American Ideals and Lived Realities

Autistic individuals, like other marginalized groups, live within the tension between the ideals of freedom, inclusion, and individuality that the U.S. claims to uphold, and the everyday reality of exclusion, surveillance, and forced normalization. Public rhetoric celebrates neurodiversity, while institutions still require autistic people to mask, suppress their sensory needs, and conform to neuronormative expectations in order to be accepted. This contradiction exposes the false neutrality of systems

that present themselves as objective and inclusive, revealing how deeply ableism is embedded within the structures of education, psychiatry, and even “helping” professions.

2. The Tension Between Shared Experience and Individual Interpretation

While autistic people often share similar experiences such as misdiagnosis, masking, sensory overwhelm, and communication breakdowns, each individual's interpretation of these events is shaped by their own intersectional context. Intersectional context, as used here, refers to the unique combination of social and cultural factors that shape an individual's experiences and perspectives. These factors include, but are not limited to, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and cultural background.

In the context of autistic individuals, this means that while they may share common experiences related to autism (like misdiagnosis or sensory overwhelm), how they interpret and are impacted by these experiences will vary significantly based on their other intersecting identities. For example, an autistic person of color may experience misdiagnosis differently due to racial biases in healthcare, or an autistic woman may face unique challenges in masking due to gendered social expectations. The "intersectional context" emphasizes that an individual's autism is not experienced in isolation but is deeply intertwined with all aspects of their identity and social position.

Autistic people are not a monolith. Just as Black feminist theory acknowledges diversity within shared struggle, Autistic Standpoint Theory holds space for variation in how neurodivergence is expressed and interpreted across race, gender, class, language, and culture. This dialectic between collective patterns and personal meanings makes Autistic Standpoint Theory flexible, inclusive, and resistant to essentialism. Essentialism, as used in this context, refers to the belief that autism has a fixed, unchanging, and inherent set of characteristics that are shared by all autistic individuals, regardless of their other identities or experiences. The sentence "This dialectic between collective patterns and personal meanings makes Autistic Standpoint Theory flexible, inclusive, and resistant to essentialism" argues against this fixed view and suggests that

while there may be common experiences among autistic people (collective patterns), the way these experiences are interpreted and lived out is unique to each individual based on their "intersectional context" (personal meanings). Therefore, being "resistant to essentialism" means that Autistic Standpoint Theory avoids:

- A "one-size-fits-all" definition of autism: It doesn't assume that all autistic people are the same or that there's a single "autistic experience."
- Ignoring diversity: It recognizes and values the differences among autistic individuals, acknowledging how factors like race, gender, and class shape their experiences.
- Reducing autism to a core deficit: It moves beyond a purely medical or neurological definition to include social, cultural, and political dimensions.

In essence, it rejects the idea of a singular, universal "autistic essence" and instead embraces the complexity and diversity of autistic identities and lived realities.

3. The Relationship Between Lived Experience and Social Knowledge

Autistic Standpoint Theory asserts that lived experience is not only valid but central to the production of social knowledge. Autistic people develop sophisticated, often unconscious analytical frameworks as they observe and adapt to a world not built for them. Their insights into communication, power dynamics, and relational injustice often exceed what formal research can capture. When these personal insights are brought into dialogue with one another, especially through online neurodivergent communities, they generate what Patricia Hill Collins calls "group knowledge," forming the basis of a collective political consciousness and social critique. This information, particularly the concept of "group knowledge" forming a collective political consciousness and social critique through shared personal insights, is highly relevant and useful for neurotypical (NT) communities as well.

Here's why:

- **Universal Application of Group Knowledge:** The mechanism described (personal insights brought into dialogue to generate "group knowledge") is a fundamental aspect of how any marginalized or underrepresented group can develop a collective understanding and critique of dominant systems. While the immediate context here is neurodivergent communities, the principle applies to any group seeking to understand and challenge existing power structures.
- **Addressing the "Double Empathy Problem":** For NT individuals, understanding how ND communities generate their own knowledge and critique is crucial for overcoming the "double empathy problem." If NTs engage with and value these forms of "group knowledge," it can bridge communication gaps and foster genuine understanding across neurotypes.
- **Challenging Dominant Narratives:** Just as ND communities critically examine neuronormative expectations, NT communities can benefit from critically examining their own "group knowledge" and societal norms. This process can expose implicit biases, ableist assumptions, and systemic issues that may go unexamined from a dominant perspective.
- **Promoting Broader Social Justice:** The document explicitly links autistic liberation to broader human rights struggles (Feature 6). Therefore, the methods used by ND communities to generate social critique are valuable tools for any group working towards social justice, including NT allies. It helps in understanding how diverse perspectives can inform a more inclusive and equitable society.
- **Expanding Understanding of Social Reality:** By engaging with the "group knowledge" generated by ND communities, NT individuals can gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of social reality. It challenges the idea of a singular, objective truth and instead highlights the importance of situated knowledges.

In essence, while the example focuses on neurodivergent communities, the underlying process of generating "group knowledge" and social critique from shared lived experiences is a powerful tool for social

change and understanding that is applicable and beneficial to all communities, including neurotypical ones, especially in fostering empathy, challenging existing norms, and promoting collective liberation.

4. The Existence of a Standpoint Does Not Guarantee Recognition or Use

Just because a standpoint exists does not mean it is acknowledged. Many autistic individuals may not realize that their insights, frustrations, and resistance constitute a unique epistemological position. Others may be aware of their social critique but lack the language, platform, or institutional recognition to be heard. Furthermore, even within academic and clinical spaces that claim to be inclusive, autistic perspectives are often dismissed as “anecdotal” or “subjective,” reinforcing ableist hierarchies of knowledge. Autistic Standpoint Theory challenges this dismissal by affirming that embodied, relational knowledge is as legitimate as any empirical metric.

5. Standpoint Must Remain Dynamic and Evolving

Like all transformative frameworks, Autistic Standpoint Theory is a living, breathing entity. It evolves as the community evolves. As language, access, and political consciousness shift, so too must our definitions and strategies. What was once framed as “high-functioning autism” is now more accurately understood as a form of masked suffering. What was once labeled “nonverbal” is increasingly reframed as “nonspeaking but communicative.” This adaptability ensures that the theory resists stagnation and reflects the complex, intersectional truths of those it aims to represent.

6. Autistic Liberation Is Part of a Larger Human Rights Struggle

Autistic oppression cannot be understood in isolation. The medicalization and social control of autistic people mirror larger dynamics of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. The forced normalization of autistic people is part of a broader cultural logic that seeks to discipline all bodies into productive, compliant units for a neoliberal society. By connecting the autistic struggle to the broader fight for human dignity, Autistic Standpoint Theory aligns itself with decolonial, queer, feminist, and disability justice movements, demanding a world that values

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In essence, while the example focuses on neurodivergent communities, the underlying process of generating "group knowledge" and social critique from shared lived experiences is a powerful tool for social change and understanding that is applicable and beneficial to all communities, including neurotypical ones, especially in fostering empathy, challenging existing norms, and promoting collective liberation.

7. The Dialectic Between Parental Standpoints and Autistic Ones

One unique feature of Autistic Standpoint Theory is its attention to the often-contradictory perspectives of parents of autistic children and autistic individuals themselves. Too often, the dominant narratives about autism come from caregivers who may view autism through the lens of burden, difficulty, or "brokenness" while autistic voices are marginalized or infantilized. This tension creates conflicting public discourses: one centered on cure and containment, the other on acceptance and agency. Autistic Standpoint Theory insists that while parental insight may be valuable, it must never override or replace the firsthand perspectives of autistic individuals.

8. The Erasure of Female, Transgender and Nonbinary Autistic Experiences

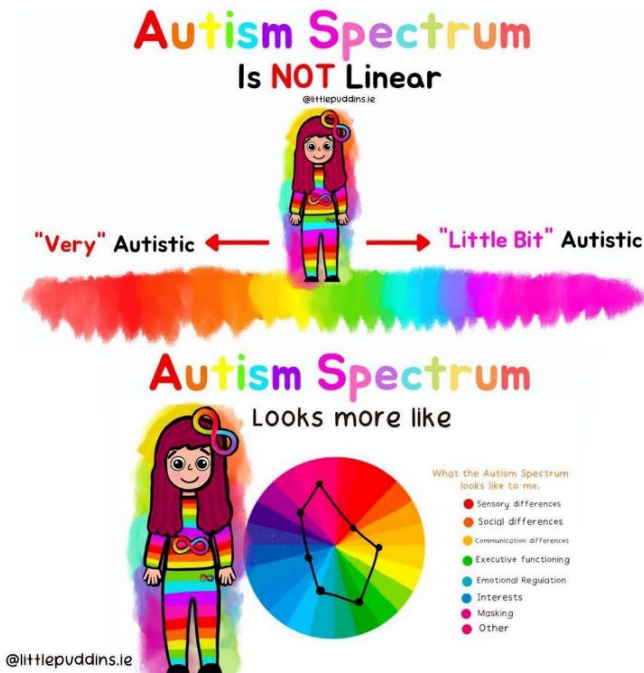
Historically, autism has been defined through a white, male, cis-gender lens, leading to widespread underdiagnosis and misrecognition of autistic people who do not conform to that prototype. Autistic women, transgender, nonbinary individuals, and people of color often mask their traits to survive in a world that punishes difference, resulting in delayed diagnosis, internalized ableism, and chronic mental health struggles. Autistic Standpoint Theory explicitly challenges this erasure by asserting the validity of gender-diverse and racialized expressions of autism and re-centering those marginalized within both neurotypical and autistic communities.

An argument could be made for a ninth and final facet of the shared autistic experience to be the difference between late diagnosis and early diagnosis when it comes to general prognosis and life outcomes as well

as life expectancy. However, it must be noted that this aspect of autism is entirely unique to the Western experience of autism and therefore this final category is not universally applicable. The inequalities related to the difference between late and early diagnosis are inherent and intrinsic to capitalism and colonial conditions, which create additional difficulties for autistics and their families.

Conclusion: A Framework for Cultural Reorientation

Autistic Standpoint Theory is not just an analytical tool; it is a call to action. It urges institutions to shift from surveillance to solidarity, from control to collaboration. It asks that we recognize autistic people not as problems to be solved, but as cultural mirrors reflecting the dysfunctions of a society built on domination and fear. It is a theory born from rupture and resilience, one that invites us to reimagine identity, power, and belonging from the ground up. In this way, it serves not only autistic liberation, but the collective liberation of all people seeking a world that honors difference as a source of wisdom, not pathology.



The Science of Sociology Is in the Vagus Nerve: Reintegrating Body, Mind, and Society

"There is no science of sociology. Perhaps there will be, some day, when a rigorous physics gives a finished science of colloidal chemistry and that leads in turn to a complete knowledge of biology, and from there to a definitive psychology. After that we may begin to know something about sociology and politics. Sometime around the year



5000 A.D., maybe—if the human race does not commit suicide before then."

Robert A. Heinlein - Solution Unsatisfactory

In his 1941 short story *Solution Unsatisfactory*, science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein wrote:

"There is no science of sociology. Perhaps there will be, some day, when a rigorous physics gives a finished science of colloidal chemistry and that leads in turn to a complete knowledge of biology, and from there to a definitive psychology. After that we may begin to know something about sociology and politics... sometime around the year 5000 A.D., maybe—if the human race does not commit suicide before then."
(Heinlein, 1941)

Heinlein's skepticism echoes a common 20th-century view: that sociology is too imprecise, too subjective, and too politically entangled to qualify as a "hard" science. This vision imagines a strict hierarchy of knowledge where physics is foundational, and sociology is the speculative icing on a long-unfinished empirical cake. Yet this reductionist framework ignores a crucial reality: human society does not rest atop science, it is science that is being embodied through culture, social norms and policy.

The science of sociology today is not best found in abstract models or idealized systems but in the neurobiology of the human body, particularly in the vagus nerve. According to Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory, this nerve is a core component of the parasympathetic nervous system, intimately tied to emotional regulation, safety perception, and relational behavior (Porges, 2011). It governs the physiological conditions necessary for empathy, cooperation, communication, and trust which are the foundations of any sustainable society. What Heinlein considered speculative becomes concrete through neuroscience. When a community is trapped in survival mode and hypervigilant, disconnected, or numb, the vagus nerve's response mirrors collective trauma. When the system is safe and connected, it co-regulates and sustains prosocial behaviors that stabilize society. In other words, the body is where sociology begins.

The Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) offers a way forward that neither abandons empirical grounding nor accepts reductionist fatalism. FCP frames society as a dynamic system in which conflict and cohesion are both natural and functional, but only when integrated through trauma-informed, emotionally aware processes (Snow, 2025). Rather than treating conflict as dysfunction, FCP sees it as a signal of systemic dysregulation, akin to how chronic stress indicates nervous system imbalance. From this view, social institutions are extensions of the collective nervous system. Schools can regulate or dysregulate. Laws can coerce or repair. Governance can repress or restore. By acknowledging that social order reflects our capacity for relational regulation, FCP places sociology not in a speculative future but in the tangible, embodied present.

This trauma-informed, bio-social view resonates with how the Ancient Greeks conceived of philosophy, not as a segmented discipline, but

as a unified pursuit of wisdom encompassing ethics, politics, cosmology, psychology, and biology. Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics saw no need to divide knowledge into “hard” and “soft.” Their goal was eudaimonia (flourishing) attainable only through integration of inner and outer order. Modern epistemology, by contrast, is fractured. Disciplinary silos separate physics from psychology, economics from ecology, and sociology from spirituality. This fragmentation reflects not intellectual maturity, but epistemological trauma: a learned disconnection between reason and feeling, mind and body, self and system. FCP and other integrative models seek to re-weave what was severed, returning us to a relational philosophy in which science serves healing, not abstraction.

To understand human societies and the crises they face we must turn to complexity theory. Systems thinkers argue that behaviors in living organisms, ecosystems, and cultures emerge from the interaction of parts, not from their reduction. Love, justice, grief, and rebellion are not simple consequences of physics; they are emergent phenomena shaped by history, emotion, and resonance across time and space. This emergence is echoed in Rupert Sheldrake’s morphic fields, which suggest that systems inherit memory beyond DNA (Sheldrake, 2009); in David Bohm’s implicate order, which posits a quantum interconnectedness behind apparent separateness (Bohm, 1980); and in James Lovelock’s Gaia Theory, which sees the Earth itself as a self-regulating organism (Lovelock, 2000). Carl Jung’s collective unconscious adds the archetypal and emotional layers of the human psyche, while the ancient idea of the Anima Mundi or the world soul suggests that consciousness is not confined to humans but is woven into the cosmos itself. A system might inherit memory outside its genetic structure through various mechanisms, primarily by interacting with and being shaped by its environment, culture, and social history. This “memory” isn’t stored in a physical, genetic sense, but rather through emergent properties of complex systems, shared experiences, and the ways information is transmitted through a collective.

Several concepts shed light on how this might occur:

- Epigenetics: While not entirely “outside” the genetic structure, epigenetics involves changes in gene expression that are not due to alterations in the underlying DNA sequence. These changes

can be influenced by environmental factors, lifestyle, and even psychological states, and some can be inherited across generations. This means that ancestral experiences, particularly traumatic ones, can leave epigenetic "marks" that influence the health and behavior of descendants without changing their DNA.

- **Cultural Transmission and Collective Memory:** Societies transmit vast amounts of information, knowledge, and behavioral patterns across generations through culture. This includes oral traditions, written history, art, rituals, social norms, and institutions. This "collective memory" shapes individual and group behavior, even if individuals aren't consciously aware of its origins. For example, a community might have ingrained responses to certain threats based on historical events, or cultural practices that reflect ancient ecological knowledge.
- **Social Learning and Mimicry:** As discussed in this book, social learning theory (even with its limitations in colonial contexts) highlights how individuals learn by observing and imitating others. This process allows behaviors, skills, and emotional responses to be transmitted without direct genetic coding. Over time, these learned behaviors can become deeply embedded in a community's way of life.
- **Morphic Fields (Rupert Sheldrake):** Sheldrake's concept of morphic fields proposes that self-organizing systems (from molecules to organisms to societies) are guided by invisible, non-physical fields that carry a kind of "memory" from previous similar systems. These fields are thought to influence the development and behavior of new systems, suggesting a collective, non-local memory that operates beyond physical and genetic structures. In this view, if a particular behavior or form has occurred frequently in the past, it becomes easier for it to occur again, as if the field itself is remembering.
- **Collective Unconscious (Carl Jung):** Jung suggested a deeper layer of the unconscious mind, shared by all humanity, containing archetypes and universal patterns of thought and behavior. This collective unconscious is inherited not through genes but through a shared human experience that transcends individual lives. It's a repository of ancestral memories, instincts, and

universal symbols that influence our perceptions, dreams, and actions.

- **Systems Thinking and Feedback Loops:** In complex systems, behaviors and patterns can emerge from the interactions of components rather than being solely dictated by individual parts. These emergent properties can be seen as a form of system memory. For instance, an ecosystem might "remember" past droughts through changes in species composition, soil structure, or water retention, which then influence future responses to similar events. Social systems can also develop patterns of response (e.g., to conflict or scarcity) that are deeply ingrained and act as a form of collective memory.
- **Neuro-Relational Dynamics:** The "Collective Nervous System" framework, as described in this book, suggests that nervous system states are co-regulated across social fields. This means that chronic stress, trauma, or safety can be shared and transmitted through interpersonal interactions, institutional structures, and even media. This "somatic memory" is stored not just in individual bodies, but in the relational patterns and emotional landscapes of groups and societies.

Given these concepts, the "storage" of this non-genetic memory is diffuse and multi-layered:

- **Cultural Artifacts and Practices:** Stories, myths, rituals, laws, traditions, technologies, and art forms all encode and transmit cultural memory.
- **Social Structures and Institutions:** The design of schools, legal systems, economic models, and family units can perpetuate historical patterns and "remember" past societal choices or traumas.
- **Shared Embodied Responses:** Chronic patterns of nervous system regulation (hypervigilance, dissociation, co-regulation) can be collectively held within a population, influencing how individuals respond to new situations based on historical, social, and even planetary conditions.

- The Environment Itself: Landscapes can hold memory through the impact of human activities (e.g., historical sites, altered ecosystems) or through the concept of the Anima Mundi, where consciousness and memory are woven into the cosmos.
- The "Morphic Field" or Collective Unconscious: These more esoteric concepts suggest a non-physical field or dimension that "remembers" patterns and forms, influencing their re-emergence.

In essence, "memory" in this context refers to inherited patterns, influences, and information that shape a system's behavior and development, extending far beyond the confines of individual genes or brains to encompass the collective, cultural, and even ecological dimensions of existence. To study sociology, then, is not to wait for physics to finish its work, but to accept that we are already embedded in a living, breathing field of relational intelligence. The science of society is not unfinished; it is emerging from the body, from the field, and from the soul of the world.

Autism has long been pathologized through a psychological and medical model that frames neurodivergent traits as deficits, abnormalities to be diagnosed, managed, or corrected. This lens isolates the individual from their social context, ignoring how norms around communication, behavior, productivity, and conformity shape what is considered "disordered." A sociological lens reframes autism not as an individual impairment, but as a relational mismatch between neurodivergent individuals and neurotypical social expectations. It draws attention to how institutions such as schools, workplaces, and healthcare systems enforce neurotypical standards of normalcy, often marginalizing or excluding autistic individuals through policies, practices, and cultural assumptions that are inherently ableist. Moreover, sociology allows us to understand autism within the larger frameworks of identity, stigma, power, and resistance. From this perspective, autistic experience is not merely a matter of neurology, but a site of political and cultural struggle, where labels, diagnoses, and interventions reflect societal values rather than objective truths. Just as feminism challenged the pathologization of women's emotions and queer theory dismantled the framing of homosexuality as a disorder, the neurodiversity paradigm demands that we examine autism not

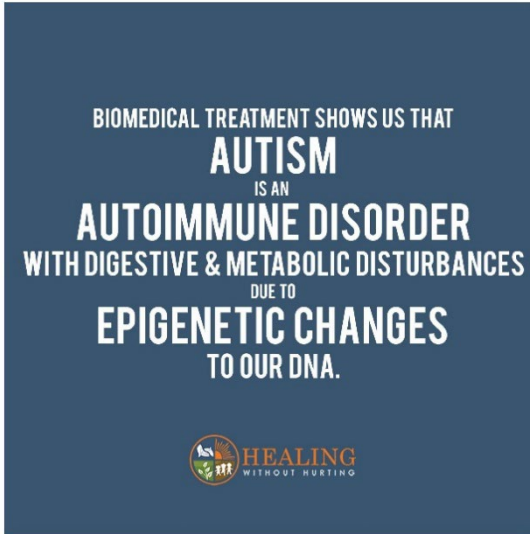
through pathology, but through social justice. A sociological perspective reveals that the problem is not autistic people, but a society structured around narrow definitions of intelligence, sociality, and worth.

Autism and neurodiversity are deeply connected to the functioning of the autonomic nervous system, particularly through the polyvagal nerve pathways that regulate stress, safety, and social engagement. According to Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory, the vagus nerve plays a key role in how individuals perceive and respond to their environment, especially in terms of threat detection and relational connection. Many autistic individuals experience heightened sensitivity to sensory input, changes in routine, or social ambiguity, which can activate defensive states such as shutdown, fight-or-flight, or withdrawal. These responses are not signs of dysfunction but are adaptive strategies rooted in nervous system regulation. Rather than viewing these reactions as behavioral problems to be fixed, a polyvagal-informed lens understands them as physiological expressions of how the body manages overwhelming or unsafe environments. This perspective reframes autism not as a psychological deficit but as a variation in how the nervous system processes the world, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed, sensory-respectful, and emotionally safe environments that support co-regulation rather than compliance.

Social norms are not neutral; they are shaped by a culture's dominant nervous system state. In a society conditioned by fear, scarcity, and competition, norms tend to reward hyper-independence, emotional suppression, and conformity which are traits that reflect a collective system stuck in chronic survival mode. Polyvagal Theory helps explain how widespread anxiety, mistrust, and social fragmentation are not just psychological trends but physiological patterns rooted in dysregulation. When entire communities operate from fight, flight, or freeze states, policies, institutions, and cultural expectations mirror that stress. Neurodivergent people, especially autistic individuals, often struggle in these environments not because they are broken, but because they are more sensitive to the nervous system distress our culture normalizes.

By adopting the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), we create a framework that centers emotional regulation, relational safety, and collective healing. FCP allows us to move from survival into thriving, not

just as individuals, but as a society and a broader global culture capable of co-regulation, empathy, and transformation. When we recognize how stress and regulation shape our reactions and behavioral responses, we stop judging and instead create environments that support growth and learning through authentic and attuned connection.



Thinking Cultural Health: The Illness Narrative

Fieldwork Assignment

Using the explanatory model first proposed by Arthur Kleinman, I conducted an ethnographic interview with a Reverend of a Washington state Buddhist Temple using the standard set of eight questions from the model provided in order to understand and assess their beliefs about illness. The purpose of this fieldwork assignment is to attain a deeper understanding of an individual's personal and socially prescribed meaning and context given to illness or sickness as they experience it. The essay is included in the book to give an example of Kleinman's model and show how it can be useful in cross-cultural applications that consider cultural context and nuance during treatment and diagnosis. Arthur Kleinman's explanatory model is a critical tool in medical anthropology for understanding how individuals and cultural groups make sense of illness. It moves beyond a purely biomedical perspective by focusing on the "explanatory models" (EMs) that patients, their families, and practitioners use to understand the causes, onset, pathology, course, and treatment of an illness.

Understanding an individual's personal and socially prescribed meaning of illness is crucial for several reasons, and it deeply integrates into the broader narrative about autism and colonialism by challenging reductionist frameworks and highlighting the impact of systemic forces on health and well-being. Firstly, it challenges the biomedical model's limitations. The Western biomedical model often reduces illness to purely physical or biological malfunctions, overlooking the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of suffering. By exploring an individual's "illness narrative" through models like Kleinman's, we move beyond a mere diagnosis to grasp the holistic experience of sickness. This is particularly relevant to autism, where dominant narratives have historically pathologized neurodivergent traits as individual deficits, ignoring the profound social and environmental context that shapes autistic experiences. Just as a physical illness is more than its biological symptoms,

neurodivergence is more than a list of diagnostic criteria; it's a lived experience shaped by societal interactions, expectations, and structures.

Secondly, it reveals the influence of "colonized reasoning" and symbolic violence. When individuals describe their illness in purely medical or mechanical terms, as exemplified by the Reverend, it can indicate an internalization of dualistic, Western frameworks that sever the mind from the body, and the individual from their social context. This "colonized mindset" mirrors how autistic experiences are often stripped of their relational meaning and reframed as individual pathologies. Colonialism, as discussed in the overall narrative, functions by imposing control and disconnecting individuals from their authentic selves and communities. Understanding how an individual narrates their illness helps to expose how deeply these dominant, often oppressive, frameworks have permeated personal understanding and expression.

Thirdly, it highlights the impact of social systems and the Collective Nervous System. An individual's journey through illness, including their search for alternative therapies or reliance on social support networks, demonstrates that health is not solely an individual event but a profoundly social one. The choices people make, the fears they may suppress, and the systems they navigate all reflect broader societal norms and conditions. In the context of the Collective Nervous System, an individual's illness narrative can be seen as a microcosm of collective dysregulation or the impact of chronic societal stressors. For autistic individuals, whose nervous systems are often more sensitive to environmental threat cues, their experiences of "illness" (often labeled as mental health issues or behavioral problems) are often direct reflections of a society that fails to provide co-regulation and safety.

Finally, it underscores the importance of relational knowledge and decolonial approaches. By prioritizing the individual's lived experience and meaning-making, we affirm that embodied, relational knowledge is as legitimate as empirical metrics. This aligns directly with Autistic Standpoint Theory, which asserts the centrality of autistic lived experience to social knowledge production. Just as the Reverend describes turning to community for solutions shows the limits of purely biomedical approaches, understanding individual illness narratives for autistic people necessitates moving beyond deficit models to embrace

neurodivergence as relational intelligence and a form of decolonial resistance against systems that pathologize difference and demand conformity.

In essence, delving into individual illness narratives provides a critical lens to demonstrate how personal health and well-being are inextricably linked to social, cultural, and political systems, thereby reinforcing the central arguments of the broader narrative about autism and colonialism.

Kleinman identified eight key questions to elicit these models:

1. What do you call the problem? (The name of the illness)
2. What do you think caused the problem? (Etiology)
3. Why do you think it started when it did? (Onset)
4. What do you think the sickness does to you? How does it work? (Pathophysiology/Mechanism)
5. How severe is the sickness? What kind of course do you expect it to take? (Severity and Prognosis)
6. What do you fear most about the sickness? (Fears)
7. What are the chief problems the sickness has caused for you? (Impact on life)
8. What kind of treatment do you think you should receive? What are the most important results you hope for from this treatment? (Desired treatment and outcomes)

Kleinman's first question, "what do you call the problem?" was answered by the Reverend with a joke, "Bob," and then the medical diagnosis for idiopathic distal neuropathy. Idiopathic distal neuropathy is a type of peripheral neuropathy (nerve damage in the limbs) where the cause is unknown and the damage primarily affects the nerves in the feet and hands. Symptoms typically include numbness, tingling, pain, muscle weakness, and a loss of coordination, often starting in the feet and progressing up the legs. The term "idiopathic" means the underlying reason for the nerve damage cannot be identified despite extensive medical evaluation. The Reverend told me that he thinks the problem is caused by a combination of age and leading a more sedentary lifestyle, which is also why he suspects it started. He described his understanding of the illness as nerve pain in his feet and distal extremities stemming from

reduced circulation; “with decreased blood flow in extremities, there is less blood flow to the nerves so they trigger sensations from tingling to pain.” This is understood to be a chronic condition, but he’s managed to get the severity of symptoms down to a 2.5 on the 1:10 standard pain scale with the help of alternative medical interventions such as infrared light, a TENS unit with electrodes that send stimulating shocks to nerve cells, a foot massager, and a specialized diet called Lectin-Free which has all helped to keep his symptoms manageable after “four separate doctors said there was nothing they could do.” When asked what his biggest fears were, he answered, “none whatsoever.” While this may be true, downplaying fears is culturally relevant for analysis because in the United States it is normal for men, and especially leaders, to present themselves as stoic, rational, and “in control” even in the face of suffering. These attributes are also associated with the Buddhist community.

His joke at the beginning of our conversation is typical of the carefree easygoing demeanor which has impressed me in our earlier meetings. But this could also be understood as a personal expression of a Western cultural social norm regarding the softening of difficult or challenging topics, such as illness narratives often are. The rest of our conversation was fairly serious in tone due to the Reverend describing his symptoms in a highly medicalized, material and biological framework. This indicated a familiarity with typical Western biomedical models for diagnosis, treatment and care. He lives and resides in Washington state but has studied Eastern culture and beliefs and visited many other countries in the course of his training and ministry. This multicultural background may have cultivated a more accepting and willing attitude when considering alternative therapies and treatments.

While not dwelling on physical symptoms, he showed a need to manage symptoms daily with multiple interventions. He showed a clear understanding of how his etiology relates to age and sedentary lifestyle, and while his explanatory model was primarily Western and biomedical based, it was supplemented with alternative and holistic solutions. While initially seeking doctors, he ultimately turned to personal research and anecdote based referrals from outside sources such as friends and colleagues recommending a change in diet they had found beneficial themselves. This shows he has a connection to a broader community and social support network that he trusts with his wellbeing and physical health.

Western biomedical models tend to focus on descriptions of physical and material perceptions and experiences rather than emotion and sensation related words and phrases, which the Reverend exemplified by describing his illness in mechanical and medical language. His answers describe the deep impact that the medicalization of Western treatment modalities has had on the ways our culture views health and wellness as a primarily physical event, and alternative medicine becoming central to the Reverend's narrative exemplifies how individuals must navigate multiple systems of care. Finding practical solutions through outside systems of social support illustrates how illness and wellness are social events, not just individual experiences.

One way to interpret the Reverend's reliance on biomedical and mechanical language is to see it as a marker of how deeply the Western mind has been colonized by dualistic frameworks. Within the biomedical model, illness is framed as a purely physical event, reduced to organs, nerves, or chemical pathways. This perspective does not leave much space for relational, emotional, or social dimensions of suffering. From a trauma-informed standpoint, however, health is always contextual and relational, and symptoms are not just isolated malfunctions of the body but experiences that are felt, narrated, and co-regulated within social worlds. Thus, when someone describes their illness without reference to emotional experience, social impact, or intersubjective meaning, it can indicate the extent to which they have internalized the colonized binary logic of Western medicine, which privileges material pathology over lived experience.

Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation experiment illustrates the consequences of this colonized mindset. When she struggled to replicate attachment behaviors in American infants, it revealed how early socialization into independence and emotional suppression had already muted the relational dimensions of distress. Babies had learned to shut down overt expressions of need, much like adults trained within biomedical systems learn to narrate their health in detached, clinical terms. Both examples show how the Western biomedical framework enforces a body/mind split that fosters binary cognition like good/bad, healthy/sick, rational/emotional, while silencing the nuanced relational knowledge that trauma-informed perspectives recognize as central to healing. In this sense, describing illness strictly as a medical or physical event may serve as an

indicator of colonized reasoning, in contrast to more integrated cultural frameworks where health is inseparable from emotion, relationship, and context.

Post-structuralism rightly critiques the authority of binary oppositions such as male/female, self/other, civilized/savage as constructed mechanisms of control. However, despite its power as a theoretical lens, post-structuralism largely omits the embodied, biological underpinnings of the binary logic it seeks to undo. One significant limitation of post-structuralism is its tendency to focus primarily on language, discourse, and social constructs as the arbiters of meaning and power. While this approach has been invaluable in deconstructing binary oppositions (e.g., male/female, self/other, civilized/savage) and revealing their role in maintaining systems of control, it often overlooks the biological and embodied foundations that also contribute to the emergence and persistence of binary thinking.

Post-structuralist thought, in its emphasis on cultural and linguistic relativity, tends to abstract these binaries from any material or physiological basis. It views them as purely ideological or discursive constructions, neglecting how human perception, cognition, and emotional responses are deeply shaped by our biological wiring and the functioning of the nervous system. For instance, the very act of categorizing and differentiating is a fundamental cognitive process, and the drive towards simplified, either/or distinctions can be heightened under certain physiological states, such as stress or threat.

Therefore, while post-structuralism excels at demonstrating how binaries are constructed and what their political implications are, it often falls short in explaining why such binary logic is so prevalent and sticky across diverse cultures and historical periods, or how it is physiologically maintained. It might deconstruct the binary of "rational/emotional" as a social construct, but it rarely delves into how the autonomic nervous system, through its regulation of safety and threat, can predispose individuals and groups towards a more rigid, black-and-white mode of thinking. By omitting these embodied underpinnings, post-structuralism risks presenting an incomplete picture of how power operates, focusing solely on the "mind" (discourse) while largely ignoring the "body" (biology and neurophysiology) as a co-creator and sustainer of these very structures it

critiques. The absence of Polyvagal Theory, which explains how the autonomic nervous system shapes perception, cognition, and social behavior, leaves a gap in our understanding of how binaries function at a physiological and relational level.

Polyvagal Theory, developed by Stephen Porges, shows that the human nervous system is wired to assess safety and danger through state-dependent perception. Under sympathetic activation (fight/flight) or dorsal vagal shutdown (freeze/collapse), the brain defaults to simplified, black-and-white thinking. Nuance disappears, and binary cognitive frameworks emerge as adaptive survival strategies. Thus, binaries are not merely ideological, they are somatic strategies, shaped by trauma, attachment history, and collective stress. This has radical implications for post-structural thought: binary categories are not just constructed, they are neurobiologically maintained through social systems that fail to regulate emotional safety. Social groups often form through shared regulation or dysregulation patterns. What we call “identity” or “culture” may be, in many cases, chronic nervous system strategies for managing threat and relational insecurity.

To extend post-structural critique, we must bring in neuro-relational theory and shift from purely discursive deconstruction to trauma-informed transformation. This means developing social systems, educational models, and cultural frameworks that soften defensive binaries by fostering ventral vagal safety, co-regulation, and emotional complexity. Without this integration, post-structuralism remains intellectually incisive but somatically disconnected, diagnosing the symptom, but not treating the source.

Ventral vagal safety, in essence, is the physiological state of feeling safe, connected, and at ease. It's the opposite of being in fight-or-flight or freeze mode. When a social system, educational model, or cultural framework fosters ventral vagal safety, it means they are designed to:

- Promote a sense of calm and well-being: This involves creating environments that are predictable, consistent, and free from perceived threats. For individuals, this might mean a quiet space, clear communication, and opportunities for self-regulation.

- Encourage authentic connection and belonging: Ventral vagal safety thrives in relationships built on trust, empathy, and mutual respect. Systems that foster this would prioritize collaborative approaches, celebrate diversity, and ensure everyone feels seen and heard.
- Support emotional expression and processing: Rather than suppressing emotions, ventral vagal safety allows for a full range of human experience. This means creating spaces where individuals feel safe to express their feelings without fear of judgment or punishment, and where tools for emotional regulation are readily available.
- Emphasize agency and choice: When individuals feel they have a say in their environment and their interactions, their nervous systems are more likely to be in a state of safety. This translates to systems that offer genuine choices, respect autonomy, and empower individuals to participate in decision-making.
- Provide opportunities for co-regulation: This is the process of two or more nervous systems interacting to create a state of calm. In a social context, this means fostering supportive relationships where individuals can lean on each other for emotional support, and where interactions are non-judgmental, forgiving, attuned and responsive.
- Minimize triggers for defensive states: This involves being mindful of potential stressors like sensory overload, unpredictable changes, critical language, and power imbalances, and actively working to reduce or mitigate them.

Significance to this Narrative:

In the context of the Reverend's following interview, Kleinman's model is highly significant because it highlights the cultural and personal layers of understanding illness beyond a simple medical diagnosis.

- Revealing Internalized Paradigms: The Reverend's answers, particularly his initial joke and subsequent medicalized descriptions, demonstrate how deeply Western biomedical frameworks have influenced his understanding, despite his multicultural background. This illustrates the concept of "colonized reasoning" discussed later in this book, where the mind defaults to

dualistic, physical interpretations of suffering, often at the expense of emotional, relational, or social dimensions.

- **Contrasting Medical vs. Lived Experience:** While the Reverend provides a detailed biomedical explanation of his neuropathy, the model allows the interviewer to probe for what is personally significant. His statement of "none whatsoever" regarding fears, when juxtaposed with the cultural expectation for male leaders to be stoic, reveals a potential area where personal experience (fear) might be suppressed or downplayed due to cultural norms.
- **Highlighting Agency and Alternative Solutions:** The fact that he turned to personal research and anecdote-based referrals after "four separate doctors said there was nothing they could do" is crucial. It shows a proactive engagement with his health that goes beyond passive acceptance of a medical prognosis. This points to the social and community aspects of healing and problem-solving, emphasizing that illness is not solely an individual medical event but a social one where individuals seek support and solutions from their networks.
- **Unpacking the "Illness Narrative":** The model helps construct the Reverend's "illness narrative" as his personal story and meaning-making around his condition. It reveals the interplay between his medical understanding, his daily management strategies, and the subtle influence of cultural expectations (e.g., stoicism, seeking alternative therapies due to multicultural exposure). This deeper narrative is what allows for the later sociological analysis about the medicalization of health and the role of social support systems.
- **Bridging to Broader Sociological Concepts:** By eliciting these detailed responses, the Kleinman model provides the groundwork for connecting the Reverend's individual experience to larger sociological concepts like the impact of Western medicalization, the body/mind split, the role of social networks in health, and even the "colonized mindset" that privileges material pathology over lived, relational experience.

Toxoplasma gondii Parasite and Wetiko Parallels

This essay is included as an example of Cultural Health and the ways that different cultures socially prescribe meaning and context given to illness or sickness as they experience it. This shows how taking a cross-cultural perspective can be useful in applications that consider multiple cultural contexts in addition to biological and/or psychological factors.

At first contact, Europeans may have had *Toxoplasma gondii* parasitic infection rates of near 50%, while Indigenous Americans had only ~10% (Bigna et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2001). This gap could have amplified behavioral contrasts, making colonizers appear more reckless, compulsive, and exploitative, which could potentially account for Indigenous descriptions of Europeans as “inhuman.” When I hear the word parasite, what comes to mind is something worm-like that consumes its nutrients by attaching itself to the internal organs of a larger living host, but parasites can also include fleas, ticks, and lice that affect the external body of a host, can include plants, animals, viruses, bacteria, fungi, or can even be single celled. A parasite is an organism that lives on or in another organism, in order to sustain itself by siphoning its nutrients from the host. Consumption of the host can lead to various diseases and/or infections. According to Trends in Parasitology (Morand, 2015), over half of all organisms on the planet are parasitical in nature, while Dobson et al (2008) states that parasites make up between 40% and over 50% of all known species. Animals have evolved into parasites more than 200 times (Yong, 2016) which makes it a common and diverse strategy for survival. Some studies have suggested that parasites outnumber free-living species by at least four times greater numbers; this basically means that anything living either is a parasite, has parasites, or both. This makes parasites integral parts of our ecosystems.

For the purpose of this essay, I have chosen to further investigate a single celled eukaryote (microparasite) called *Toxoplasma gondii*,

which belongs to the class Conoidasida, within the phylum Apicomplexa, which also includes the malaria causing parasite. Apicomplexa are a large group of obligate intracellular, parasitic protozoa (Delgado et al, 2012). *Toxoplasma gondii* are generally measured in micrometers (μm), and *T. gondii* tachyzoites are typically about 4–7 μm long. To survive, it lives inside the cells of other animals which it does by infecting its host through undercooked meat that contains cysts, through water, soil, or produce contaminated with cat fecal matter, congenitally from mother to fetus when mothers become infected during pregnancy, and occasionally through blood or organ donor transplantation. Its reproductive cycle can only occur in feline cats, but virtually any warm-blooded animal can be a host to *Toxoplasma gondii*. It is a zoonotic intracellular apicomplexan protozoan parasite of mammals and birds and is one of the most common parasites globally (Western College of Veterinary Medicine, 2021), but particularly in developed countries that are more likely to keep feline companions as pets.

Three physical characteristics that interest me about *T. gondii* tachyzoites include their crescent or banana shape, the set of organelles at the tip of the parasite which allow it to invade host cells (micronemes, rhoptries, conoid), and the bradyzoite tissue cysts that *T. gondii* forms in muscle and neurological tissues that can cause reoccurrence to occur even after significant time has passed. Beyond the physical characteristics, I am far more interested in *T. gondii* symptoms which are reported to cause behavioral changes in the host, for instance, in rodents, it suppresses an instinctual fear of cats, making them easier prey, which benefits the parasite's life cycle. In humans, *T. gondii* infections have been correlated with increased risk-taking, impulsivity, and even shifts in personality traits and dopamine regulation.

The associated behavioral symptoms include risk seeking, aggression, dysregulated moods, cognitive shifts and personality changes, links to psychosis, dopamine hijacks, and changes to reproductive patterns. These mirror the symptoms associated with Wetiko, reckless consumption, domination and violence, cultural delusion, mass possession states, collective trauma cycles, addiction and greed which are spread socially. Paul Levy popularizes Wetiko

in modern psychology and describes it as a psychospiritual parasite that feeds off unconsciousness, replicating itself by consuming others. While there's no evidence that *T. gondii* is Wetiko, the parasite provides a potential biological analogy for collective possession states. "Like viruses or malware infect a computer and program it to self-destruct, wetiko programs the human biocomputer to think and behave in self-destructive ways" (Levy, 2014).

Toxoplasma gondii is found worldwide and is very common, especially in areas with many cats. Cats are the definitive hosts and the only animal capable of assisting *T. gondii* in sexually reproducing, but it can still infect almost all warm-blooded animals. It has an indirect life cycle with three stages: oocysts, tachyzoites, and bradyzoite tissue cysts. It reproduces sexually in cats and asexually in other animals. It is transmitted by cat feces, undercooked meat, or from mother to baby. It causes a disease called toxoplasmosis. Symptoms are usually mild flu-like illness, but in pregnant or immunocompromised people it can cause brain, eye, or pregnancy problems. Toxoplasmosis is mostly endemic because it is found regularly around the world. An epidemic happened in 1995 in British Columbia, Canada, when a city's water supply was contaminated, causing over 100 cases, including in pregnant women (Bowie et al., 1997). Epidemics are rare compared to everyday endemic cases. *Toxoplasma gondii* is widespread and stable in most regions, but it is considered emerging in some places because farming, climate, and cat populations affect how it spreads (Robert-Gangneux & Dardé, 2012). The evidence is that outbreaks have been linked to contaminated water, undercooked meat, and global changes in cat populations (Dubey, 2021). There is no vaccine for humans, but medicines like pyrimethamine and sulfadiazine can treat toxoplasmosis. These treatments are effective at controlling symptoms but cannot remove the parasite's tissue cysts completely (Montoya & Liesenfeld, 2004; CDC, 2024).

There is growing reason to suspect that *Toxoplasma gondii* may bias social behavior toward hierarchical aggression. By increasing aggression, irritability, and risk-taking, while simultaneously altering dopamine regulation, the parasite encourages behaviors associated with dominance and control. In group-living species,

aggression often functions to establish social rank, which means infection could tip the balance toward more rigid dominance–submission structures. In humans, this dynamic may have amplified punitive tendencies within already hierarchical societies, reinforcing authority through fear, coercion, and harsh punishment. While *T. gondii* alone would not create hierarchy, in cultures already organized around power and control, its behavioral effects could entrench those dynamics, aligning with the Wetiko “mind-virus” in which parasitic influence thrives most effectively where fear, aggression, and dominance are culturally normalized.

Our current social structure can be read as a macro-scale reflection of parasitic influence, much like the behavioral manipulations seen in *Toxoplasma gondii*. Just as the parasite drives its hosts toward risk-taking, aggression, and diminished empathy, modern systems are organized around competition, coercion, and consumption, rewarding domination while normalizing cycles of punishment. The parasite exploits neurological blind spots, and our culture mirrors this by exploiting collective vulnerabilities such as fear, trauma, and the need for belonging to sustain extractive economies and hierarchical power. In this way, the punitive, consumption-driven systems we inhabit resemble an infected host: compelled to act against our own best interests, perpetuating violence and imbalance, while the “parasite” of unchecked exploitation and Wetiko-like greed feeds on our collective unconsciousness.

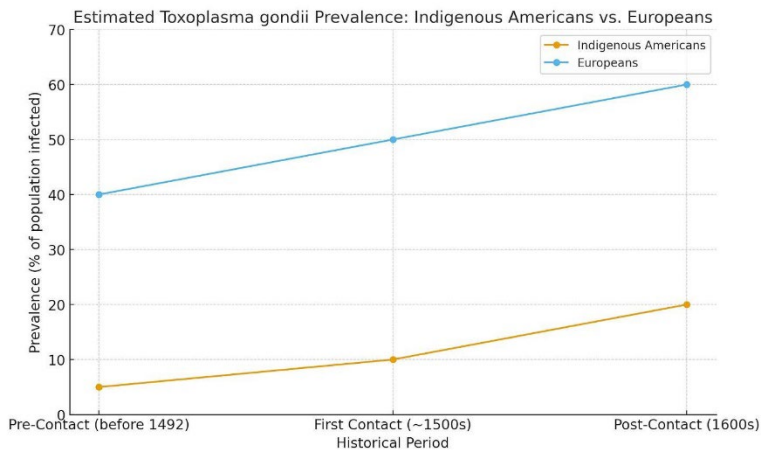
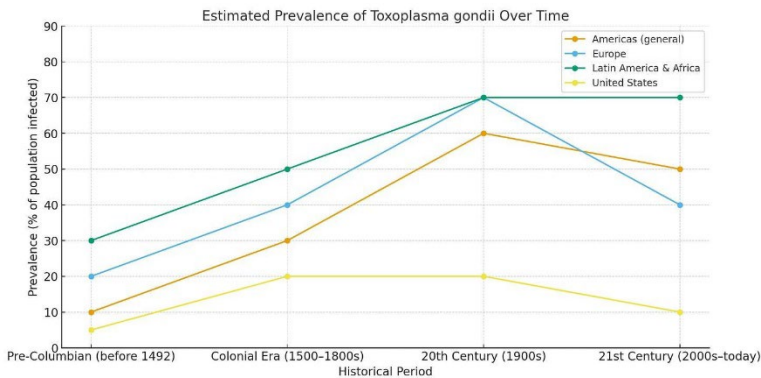
Because of the apparent similarities between Wetiko and *Toxoplasma gondii*, I wanted to explore the association between the colonization of the American continent with the prevalence of the parasite. My hypothesis is that the introduction of domestic cats to pre-Columbian indigenous American populations dramatically increased transmission rates to both natives and colonial settlers. It’s difficult to establish this historically because *T. gondii* was only first described independently by two separate research teams in 1908, but at face value this theory carries logical value due to indigenous ecosystems including wild felines but lacking domesticated cat varieties, which would have lowered the likelihood of their exposure. A structured look at what is known about *T. gondii* shows that globally, 30–50% of the world’s population is currently infected ($\approx 2\text{--}3$

billion people) (Montazeri et al., 2020; Robert-Gangneux & Dardé, 2012), while rates in Latin America and Africa remain among the highest, often 50–80% (Bigna et al., 2020; Robert-Gangneux & Dardé, 2012), but of particular relevance to my hypothesis is the fact that in Europe, rates are now down to 20–50% but have historically been very high also (up to 80% in France, due to culinary practices with undercooked meat) (Robert-Gangneux & Dardé, 2012). In the U.S. *T. gondii* rates are about 9–14% (declining trend) (Jones et al., 2001).

To get a fairly accurate time-scale perspective, we can assume that Pre-Columbian era prevalence was likely lower in Indigenous societies (less domestication, smaller settlements) (Robert-Gangneux & Dardé, 2012), but Post-1492 prevalence rates probably rose sharply particularly in urbanizing and agricultural contexts where domesticated cats would be frequently kept as pets or for pest relief. The country variation shows a higher prevalence (50–80%) can be found in countries where colonial expansions originated such as parts of continental Europe (France, Germany) (Bigna et al., 2020; Robert-Gangneux & Dardé, 2012), with a lower prevalence (10–20%) being found in countries that were colonized like the U.S., U.K., and parts of Asia (Bigna et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2001). The country variation combined with the rates of transmission along with known historical data supports my hypothesis, and this indicates that Wetiko as a psychic and behavioral phenomenon and the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii* are strongly associated with each other. Recent studies show a decline in prevalence globally, correlating with post-colonial food safety and hygienic awareness practices, with higher rates in Latin America and Africa relating to undercooked meat practices along with higher heat indexes in those areas.

T. gondii symptoms include risk-taking, aggression, mood dysregulation, and altered dopamine pathways. These map onto Wetiko traits such as reckless consumption, domination, collective delusion, and addictive greed (Levy, 2014). Both operate like “mind-viruses” that hijack behavior and spread socially. While an estimated 50% of Europeans might have been infected with *T. gondii* during first contact (see two illustrative graphs below), only 10% of indigenous Americans may have been carriers of the parasite

at that time based on existing data (Bigna et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2001; Robert-Gangneux & Dardé, 2012). This hypothesis and research are meaningful because it potentially accounts for the behavioral differences remarked upon by the indigenous at the time of Columbus, and it illustrates the statistically significant difference in rates of infection between colonial and indigenous populations. This statistical and geographical difference could possibly provide one explanation for Wetiko, which Levy calls a contagious psycho-spiritual disease of the soul and cannibalistic spirit that transforms humans into “predatory monsters” of greed.



The Collective Nervous System: A Trauma-Informed Framework for Structural and Somatic Analysis

“We need more psychology; we need more understanding of human nature because the only real danger that exists is man himself. He is the great danger, and we are pitifully unaware of it. His psyche should be studied because we are the origin of all coming evil.”

- C. G. Jung, Interview with John Freeman Face to Face, 1959

I am proposing the Collective Nervous System (CNS) as a framework for understanding how individual and group nervous system states are shaped not only by personal experience, but by systems of power, media, historical trauma, and planetary conditions. Building on trauma-informed theory, Jungian archetypes, polyvagal science, systems theory, Indigenous knowledge, and media ecology, the CNS suggests that somatic regulation and dysregulation occur across social fields, not only within individual bodies. The model situates trauma within the structural conditions that produce chronic survival states and calls for a shift in how we understand safety, justice, healing, and governance. Healing cannot be isolated. It must become collective, systemic, and relational.

1. Introduction

Trauma-informed approaches have become more mainstream in psychology, education, and even policy spaces. However, these frameworks often remain bound to individualistic, therapeutic models that ignore the relational and structural determinants of regulation. This paper proposes the Collective Nervous System (CNS) as an expanded framework that understands nervous systems as co-regulated across space, time, and institutional structure, and shaped by histories of colonization, capitalism, and dislocation.

The nervous system is not only a personal organ of survival. It is also a site where history lives, where power operates, and where resistance begins. This writing integrates perspectives from

polyvagal theory, depth psychology, media studies, and Indigenous epistemology to argue that regulation and dysregulation must be seen as socially produced and collectively shared phenomena.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Jung's Collective Unconscious as a Precedent

Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1968) introduced the idea that psychic content is not entirely individual. Jung described archetypes as inherited psychic patterns that transcend culture and time. The Collective Nervous System extends this logic into somatic space. Rather than symbols and dreams, it centers embodied responses such as chronic hypervigilance, shutdown, or dissociation which are shared across lineages, communities, and cultures.

2.2 Polyvagal Theory and Structural Neuroception

Stephen Porges' (2011) polyvagal theory advanced the understanding of autonomic states by identifying how the body responds to cues of safety or danger through neuroception, or subconscious sensory scanning. While polyvagal theory is widely used in therapeutic practice, it is rarely applied to systemic analysis. The CNS reframes neuroception as socially and politically mediated. Racialized, criminalized, and colonized bodies experience society through persistent threat cues. What is often pathologized as personal dysregulation is more accurately described as structural survival adaptation.

2.3 Systems Theory and the Ecology of Mind

Gregory Bateson's (1972) systems theory and cybernetics emphasized that the mind is not limited to the brain. Instead, it emerges from relationships, feedback loops, and environments. The CNS model builds on Bateson's insights by reframing regulation itself as a distributed, relational capacity. The individual cannot regulate in isolation. Regulation is contingent on social and material conditions such as housing, policing, education, media, and relational culture.

2.4 Collective Trauma and Somatic Fields

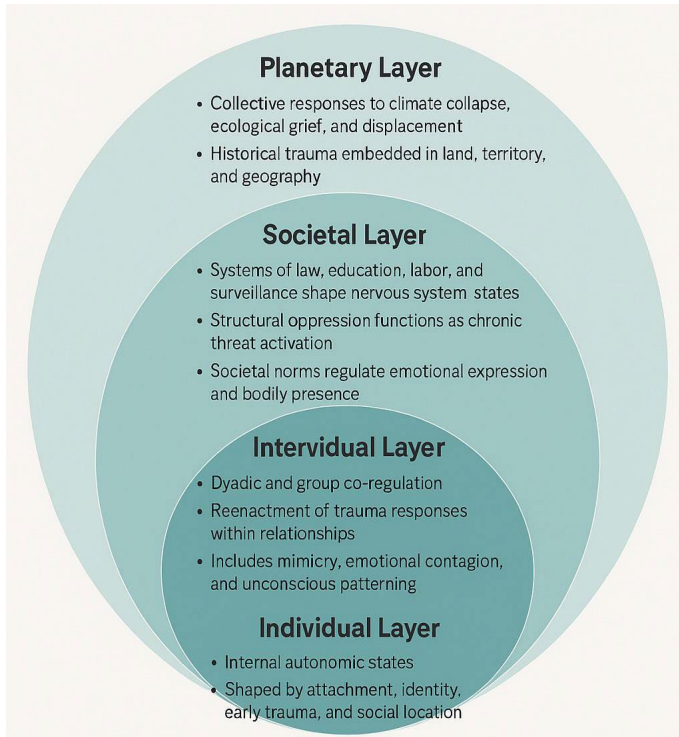
Thomas Hübl's (2020) work on collective trauma articulates how harm is embedded in intergenerational and cultural fields. The CNS incorporates this concept but frames it in terms of shared nervous system states. Groups that experience genocide, colonization, slavery, or forced migration carry unresolved survival responses that manifest as dissociation, shutdown, or reactivity regardless of whether the trauma was personally experienced. These are not only memories, but embodied social realities.

2.5 Media, Attention, and the Technological Nervous System

Marshall McLuhan (1964) described media as extensions of the human nervous system, predicting that digital technologies would reshape not only perception but cognition and emotion. The CNS interprets this as a literal shift. Social media, algorithmic platforms, and surveillance technologies function as externalized nervous systems amplifying collective dysregulation through outrage cycles, fear signaling, and dissociative scrolling. The internet itself constitutes a fragmented, hyperaroused nervous system without boundaries or rhythm.

2.6 Indigenous and Decolonial Knowledge Systems

Indigenous worldviews, long predating Western psychology, have emphasized that identity, health, and memory are inherently relational. These traditions understand trauma as ecological, ancestral, and interpersonal rather than private. The CNS framework draws from this epistemology to reject the Western assumption of the isolated self. Healing, from this perspective, is always communal and must involve land, lineage, story, and ritual (Wilson, 2008; Simpson, 2014).



3. Structural Layers of the Collective Nervous System

The CNS operates across four interdependent layers:

3.1 Individual Layer

- Internal autonomic states
- Shaped by attachment, identity, and early trauma
- Personal experiences of safety and danger

3.2 Interpersonal Layer

- Co-regulation between individuals and groups
- Emotional contagion, trauma reenactment, mimicry
- Dyadic nervous system feedback loops

3.3 Societal and Institutional Layer

- Institutions (education, law, healthcare, policing) shape somatic safety
- Structural oppression activates chronic fight/flight/freeze states
- Social norms regulate emotional expression and bodily presence

3.4 Planetary Layer

- Collective responses to ecological collapse, climate grief, and dislocation
- Historical trauma embedded in land, geography, and extraction economies
- Global capitalism as a system of chronic dysregulation

4. Applications

4.1 Governance and Justice

Governments and legal systems must integrate an understanding of the nervous system into public policy. Punitive systems reinforce dysregulation. Restorative and relational justice models offer alternatives grounded in co-regulation and collective healing (Kaba & Hassan, 2020). Here are some suggestions for how governments and legal systems might integrate an understanding of the nervous system into public policy, leading to a more regulated and collectively healed society:

- Implement Trauma-Informed Practices Across All Agencies:
 - Police and First Responders: Train officers in de-escalation techniques rooted in polyvagal theory, emphasizing the recognition of nervous system states (fight, flight, freeze) and responding with co-regulating

presence rather than punitive force. This could include training on how to interact with individuals experiencing sensory overload, dissociation, or heightened threat responses.

- Court Systems: Introduce trauma-informed judges, prosecutors, and public defenders who understand how trauma impacts memory, behavior, and testimony. This could lead to less adversarial proceedings and more restorative justice approaches that prioritize healing over punishment.
- Social Services: Ensure social workers and child protective services are trained to identify and respond to nervous system dysregulation in families, focusing on supporting co-regulation and building safe attachment, rather than simply removing children or imposing harsh penalties.
- Prioritize Restorative Justice Programs:
 - Victim-Offender Dialogue: Fund and expand programs where victims and offenders can communicate in a facilitated, safe environment, focusing on repairing harm and understanding the impact of actions, which can be highly regulating for both parties.
 - Community Conferencing: Implement community-led processes for addressing harm that involve all affected parties, promoting collective responsibility and problem-solving to restore social bonds and prevent re-offending.
 - Diversion Programs: Create alternatives to incarceration that focus on addressing underlying trauma and dysregulation through therapy, skill-building, and community support, rather than solely punitive measures.
- Reform Punitive Policies to Support Regulation:
 - Decriminalize Certain Offenses: Re-evaluate laws that disproportionately affect individuals experiencing mental health crises or trauma-related behaviors, shifting from criminalization to public health responses.

- Reduce Solitary Confinement: Recognize solitary confinement as a deeply dysregulating practice that exacerbates mental health issues and hinders rehabilitation. Implement humane alternatives that promote connection and sensory regulation.
- Reimagine Probation and Parole: Shift from surveillance-based models to supportive frameworks that prioritize the individual's well-being, access to resources, and opportunities for co-regulation and skill development.
- Invest in Community-Based Co-regulation Initiatives:
 - Public Green Spaces and Nature Access: Recognize the regulating power of nature and invest in accessible parks, green spaces, and community gardens that provide opportunities for ventral vagal activation and stress reduction.
 - Community Hubs for Connection: Fund and support community centers, arts programs, and social initiatives that foster genuine connection, belonging, and opportunities for collective regulation.
 - Parenting Support and Education: Offer accessible programs that educate parents on secure attachment, co-regulation, and trauma-informed parenting practices, recognizing the foundational role of early relational experiences in shaping nervous system development.
- Integrate Neurobiology into Policy Development:
 - "Nervous System Impact Assessments": Develop frameworks for assessing how proposed policies might impact collective nervous system states, considering potential for increased stress, fear, or disconnection versus promoting safety and regulation.
 - Cross-Sector Collaboration: Foster collaboration between neuroscientists, sociologists, legal scholars, and community leaders to ensure that policy development is informed by a holistic understanding of human well-being.

By adopting these approaches, governments and legal systems can move beyond simply managing "bad" behavior and instead cultivate environments that genuinely support emotional regulation, relational health, and collective thriving, thereby benefiting all members of society through reduced conflict, improved mental health outcomes, and stronger community bonds.

4.2 Education

Classrooms are often spaces of control, shame, and surveillance. Trauma-informed education demands a reorientation toward safety, agency, and emotional literacy as central components of learning (Craig, 2016).

4.3 Technology and Design

Digital platforms must be redesigned to prioritize nervous system stability. Algorithms built to trigger fear, comparison, and compulsive use contribute to collective dysregulation. Attunement should replace extraction as a design ethic (Odell, 2019). To pressure media companies into adopting attunement over extraction as a design ethic, a multi-pronged approach involving various stakeholders would be necessary:

Government Regulation

Governments could introduce legislation that mandates greater transparency in algorithmic design and data use. This could include:

- **Algorithmic Audits:** Requiring independent audits of algorithms to identify and mitigate features that exploit psychological vulnerabilities (e.g., those designed to maximize engagement through outrage or fear).
- **Data Privacy Laws:** Strengthening data privacy regulations, such as GDPR in Europe or new federal laws in the US, to give users more control over their data and limit companies' ability to use it for manipulative purposes.
- **"Duty of Care" Legislation:** Imposing a legal "duty of care" on social media companies to protect users from harm, similar to regulations in other industries. This would hold them

accountable for the mental health and well-being impacts of their platforms.

- **Restrictions on Behavioral Advertising:** Limiting or banning certain types of highly targeted behavioral advertising that rely on exploiting user vulnerabilities and drive compulsive use.
- **Funding for Independent Research:** Allocating government funds for independent research into the psychological and societal impacts of media algorithms, providing evidence for further regulatory action.

Consumer and Activist Pressure

User movements and advocacy groups can play a significant role in raising awareness and demanding change:

- **Boycotts and Campaigns:** Organizing boycotts of platforms or features that are demonstrably harmful, and launching public awareness campaigns to educate users about manipulative design practices.
- **Shareholder Activism:** Investors and ethical funds can pressure companies through shareholder resolutions, demanding changes to business practices that prioritize profit over user well-being.
- **Digital Wellness Movements:** Promoting digital wellness practices and encouraging users to reduce their engagement with platforms designed for compulsive use, thereby reducing the economic incentive for such designs.
- **Legal Challenges:** Class-action lawsuits or other legal challenges from individuals or groups harmed by platform designs could force companies to re-evaluate their practices.

Industry Self-Regulation and Ethical Design

While less likely without external pressure, some companies might respond to internal ethical considerations or competitive advantages:

- **Ethical Design Principles:** Developing and adopting industry-wide ethical design principles that prioritize user well-

being, mental health, and genuine connection over engagement metrics.

- **Certification and Standards:** Creating independent certifications for platforms that adhere to ethical design and data practices, allowing consumers to choose more "attuned" services.
- **Competitive Pressure:** New platforms or business models that genuinely prioritize user well-being could emerge, creating competitive pressure on existing giants to adapt or lose market share.
- **Internal Whistleblowers:** Employees with ethical concerns can expose harmful practices, generating public outcry and regulatory scrutiny.

Education and Media Literacy

Educating the public about how algorithms work and how media impacts their nervous systems is crucial:

- **Curriculum Development:** Integrating media literacy and digital well-being into educational curricula from an early age.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Large-scale public awareness campaigns to demystify algorithmic functions and their psychological effects, empowering users to make more informed choices.

By combining these approaches, the collective dysregulation fostered by current media designs could be challenged, ultimately pushing media companies towards more ethical and attunement-focused practices.

4.4 Community Healing

Therapeutic models must extend beyond the individual. Collective grief rituals, story circles, somatic group work, and land-based healing practices all work to re-regulate the CNS at scale.



Conclusion

The emerging model of a Collective Nervous System compels a reorientation of how we understand human connection, social responsibility, and planetary well-being. If our nervous systems are not discrete but fundamentally interwoven, resonating through co-regulation, empathy, trauma transmission, and emotional contagion, then healing and regulation are necessarily collective acts. This implies a shared ethical imperative: we are each partially responsible for the emotional regulation and dysregulation of others. Our relationships, institutions, and technologies either buffer or overwhelm our shared somatic field. The illusion of individualism collapses in the face of this reality. Interdependence is not just emotional or spiritual, it is physiological and neurological.

Furthermore, when viewed through the lens of the Gaia Hypothesis, proposed by James Lovelock and later supported by Lynn Margulis, this Collective Nervous System becomes more than a metaphor, it becomes the sensory organ of the planet itself. According to Gaia theory, Earth is a self-regulating, living system composed of interacting biospheric and geophysical processes. In this context, humanity (along with all other animals) functions as Gaia's collective nervous system, sensing, reacting, and influencing feedback loops within the broader ecological organism (Lovelock, 1979). Our social dysregulation, collective trauma, and systemic violence reverberate as dysfunctions in Gaia's capacity to self-regulate. Conversely, cultivating emotional attunement, mutual care, and systems of co-regulation is not only a path toward social healing, it is planetary medicine. To embrace the truth of a Collective Nervous System is to step into a new relational ethic, one that honors our shared emotional infrastructure, our neural entanglement, and our planetary embeddedness. Regulation, then, is not only personal but ecological, interpersonal, and cosmological. This means that when humanity operates from a place of collective stress, fear, and disconnection, the very dysregulation the CNS framework describes, these states manifest as real-world ecological imbalances.

For example:

- **Climate Change and Resource Depletion:** A society driven by chronic survival mode (fear of scarcity, competition, hyper-individualism) will prioritize extraction, consumption, and short-term gain over long-term planetary health. This collective dysregulation manifests as deforestation, pollution, unsustainable agriculture, and the relentless burning of fossil fuels. These actions are, in essence, the "symptoms" of a dysregulated collective nervous system, mirroring human internal states of imbalance onto the planet's systems. The inability to "co-regulate" with the Earth, to listen to its signals and adapt human behavior, leads to a feedback loop of ecological crisis.
- **Biodiversity Loss:** When human societies are disconnected from each other and from nature, they tend to view other species and ecosystems as resources to exploit rather than

interconnected parts of a larger living system. This lack of "interpersonal" (or interspecies) attunement, stemming from a collective state of detachment, contributes to habitat destruction, species extinction, and a general disregard for the intricate web of life that supports planetary health.

- Environmental Injustice: The "structural survival adaptation" described in the CNS framework, where marginalized bodies experience persistent threat, also plays out on the planetary layer. Communities that are systemically oppressed (often racialized or low-income populations) are disproportionately affected by pollution and environmental degradation. This is a manifestation of collective dysregulation where power-over dynamics in human society are projected onto the environment, leading to the "dumping" of environmental burdens on the least powerful. This reflects a deep inability to co-regulate and share resources equitably, extending human social trauma into the ecological sphere.

The article *What Is One Health?* by John Drake defines one health as the interconnectedness of the health of people, animals, and the environment. The idea of being part of an interdependent and mutually beneficial web and that web having its own non localized form of shared or collective consciousness is a concept that has heavily influenced my own research on The Collective Nervous System and my continued work in attempting to create a social theory grounded in a relational framework that defines one's self in relation to the living ecosystem it belongs to and is a part of. The CDC defines one health as a "collaborative, multi-sectoral, and transdisciplinary approach" aimed at "achieving optimal health outcomes recognizing the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment." This has strong parallels to the speech given by Noam Chomsky regarding America's hypocritical War on Terror. when he said to Harvard University in 2002 that the only real moral standard or ethical code that everyone can agree on is survival, because everyone has a basic biological drive to survive. What if we started there as a species, with survival as a common denominator, and went on to build a shared narrative? If humanity used nervous system health, including polyvagal health and attachment theories as a baseline

for our social structures and norms, then society would look very different; if we had a shared identity as one single biological ecosystem consisting of individual points of experience, then we would operate from cooperation instead of competition. That's the framework that One World, One Health represents, is the world that I hope to help create and inform with my social theory and is supported by this book and this cooperative approach is also one that Chomsky's speech supports. This is necessary because unless we develop an ethical and moral framework based on a relational identity and knowing one's self as part of a greater collective being through a single shared narrative, we won't be able to survive as a species and will drive ourselves to extinction through separatist hyper individualism. One Health, one cure. suggests "that some sort of body needs to be established for international cooperation on preventing zoonotic disease pandemics. The obvious placement for an agency of this kind would be under U.N. auspices, although this could be slow-going. An effort kick-started by the G7 could move more quickly" and that doing so would effectively prevent the occurrence of future pandemic outbreaks. Epidemics of bird flu and studies of ebola outbreaks connected to bushmeat indicate the need for developing a One World approach to prioritize survival and eliminate future outbreaks. The TEDx Talk with Sharon Deem, "One Health in an Age of Climate Change, Extinctions, and a Pandemic". reminds us that "our human health is dependent on other species. There truly is only one health, and the health of human and non-human animals and ecosystems are all connected."

In essence, our collective human nervous system, when operating in chronic survival states, creates feedback loops of behavior (e.g., unsustainable economic practices, social fragmentation, disregard for ecological limits) that directly undermine Gaia's ability to maintain balance. The "dysfunction in Gaia's capacity to self-regulate" is therefore a direct reflection of humanity's inability to regulate itself collectively and relationally.

The Dual-Pathway Model of Autism: Genetic Sensitivity, Trauma Adaptation, and the Ecology of Connection

“Safety is not the absence of threat, but the presence of connection.”
— Stephen Porges (*The Polyvagal Theory*, 2011)

“The body keeps the score; if the memory of trauma is encoded in the body, so too is the memory of safety.” — Bessel van der Kolk (*The Body Keeps the Score*, 2014)

“Autism does not exist in a vacuum; it emerges in proportion to the fragmentation of the society observing it.” — Isha Sarah Snow, *Autism in America: One Woman’s Search for Healing* (2025)

The previous chapter ended with the recognition that families, institutions, and nations all operate by the same nervous-system logic: when one dysregulates, the others echo its imbalance. This chapter deepens that premise by framing autism as a dual-pathway adaptive mechanism, one biological and one environmental, through which the human organism mirrors the condition of its world. Here, autism ceases to appear as disorder and instead becomes communication: the body’s signal that relational coherence has faltered.

We inherit more than DNA. We inherit ways of feeling the world. Attachment is the first language through which this inheritance is expressed, transmitted in the tone of a caregiver’s voice, the rhythm of a held heartbeat, and the consistency with which distress meets comfort. Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1978) showed that these early relational patterns sculpt both psyche and physiology. Secure attachment calibrates a nervous system for trust, while misattunement wires it for defense. The same dynamics are then replicated at every social scale: families, schools, governments, and economies become macro-nervous systems reflecting the conditions of their origins.

In this ecology, autism arises as a mirror. Early-onset forms reveal an inherited fidelity to coherence, while late-onset or trauma-activated forms reveal learned sensitivity after safety has failed. Both are expressions of humanity's attempt to regulate itself.

Early-Onset Autism – Genetic Sensitivity to Relational Discord

Large-scale genomic studies identify more than a hundred autism-associated loci concentrated in genes that regulate synaptic formation and neural connectivity (Satterstrom et al., 2020). Variants in SHANK3, CNTNAP2, and NLGN4 heighten neural precision rather than diminish capacity (Zink et al., 2022). Infants who will later be diagnosed autistic display increased cortical arousal and faster orientation to environmental irregularities (Dawson et al., 2004). These findings describe a brain optimized for accuracy, a biological intolerance for incongruence.

From an evolutionary perspective, this precision may have preserved group survival. In complex social species, members who detect inconsistency or deception serve as regulators of integrity. Autism thus represents a lineage specialized for coherence detection, a biological conscience within the human ecosystem. This parallels the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) where difference and friction are not malfunctions but self-regulating feedback within living systems.

When such fidelity meets cultures organized around performance, coercion, or denial, the result is distress. What once stabilized the tribe becomes stigmatized within the market. The same honesty and sensory precision that protected collective safety are reinterpreted as “rigidity” or “deficit.” Polyvagal theory clarifies the mechanism: the nervous system thrives on predictable cues of safety and collapses under mixed signals (Porges, 2011). In societies that chronically reward mask-wearing, heightened sensitivity no longer protects; it injures and places one at higher risk of being targeted and pathologized for differences.

Late-Onset or Trauma-Activated Autism – Environmental Sensitization

For many adults, autistic-like traits emerge gradually after years of relational strain: social withdrawal, sensory overwhelm, and emotional blunting following chronic invalidation. Trauma research provides a

mechanism. Persistent activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis elevates cortisol and inflammatory cytokines, reshaping neural connectivity (Danese & McEwen, 2012). Epigenetic studies show that neglect and prolonged stress can methylate the OXTR (oxytocin-receptor) and NR3C1 (glucocorticoid-receptor) genes, altering social engagement and stress resilience (McGowan et al., 2009). These molecular changes mirror core autistic features such as muted affect, hypersensitivity, and difficulty decoding social nuance.

Late-identified autistic adults often describe decades of masking and hyper-adaptation followed by collapse, a phenomenon now termed autistic burnout (Hull et al., 2017). Neuroimaging reveals reduced connectivity between limbic and prefrontal regions in such histories (van der Werff et al., 2013). The apparent “loss of function” is in fact the body’s refusal to continue performing coherence it no longer feels. Where early-onset autism inherits sensitivity genetically, late-onset autism acquires it epigenetically. Both reveal the same law of living systems: when dissonance becomes intolerable, the organism reorganizes toward truth.

Attachment, Power, and the Social Nervous System

Attachment theory describes not only family bonds but societal organization. Cultures that idolize independence reproduce avoidant attachment at scale through institutions that withhold comfort yet demand productivity. Authoritarian regimes mirror ambivalent attachment, oscillating between intrusion and neglect. In each, power replaces care when vulnerability feels unsafe. Foucault (1977) described this as disciplinary power, control internalized through fear.

Autistic resistance to such systems is therefore not defiance but integrity. Those most attuned to incongruence manifest the body’s protest against coercion. When structures demand conformity at the expense of authenticity, sensitive bodies become symptomatic on behalf of the collective. They function as civilization’s early-warning system.

The Dual-Pathway Feedback System

Integrating genetic and environmental data, autism can be seen as a dual feedback mechanism in the collective nervous system. The genetic pathway preserves coherence across generations, while the

environmental pathway amplifies sensitivity when coherence collapses. One is congenital and the other acquired, yet both express the same adaptive principle.

In the genetic pathway, early-onset autism arises from inherited neurobiological sensitivity shaped by genes such as SHANK3, CNTNAP2, and NLGN4. This mechanism heightens sensory precision and supports the detection of relational discord. The expression of this pathway manifests as authenticity, direct communication, and ecological attunement.

In the environmental pathway, late-onset autism emerges through trauma-induced sensitization, including methylation changes in OXTR and NR3C1. This mechanism signals relational collapse and expresses through burnout, hypervigilance, and emotional withdrawal.

Rising autism prevalence therefore communicates not genetic decay but relational distress. Epidemiological mapping shows the highest diagnostic rates in industrialized, high-pressure societies (Solmi et al., 2022). Prevalence correlates more strongly with social isolation, inequality, and diagnostic access than with any singular gene. The body has become the register of civilization's attachment wounds.

Ecology and the Memory of Connection

Before the Roman word *familia* existed, people lived in circles of interdependence and shared meaning. They were bound by the need to survive but also by the instinct to care, to attach, to remember, and to create together. Love existed, though not always in the romantic or nuclear sense; it was diffuse, ecological, and shared. The word *family* narrowed what was once a field. It drew boundaries around something that had been vast, mysterious, and woven into all of life. We still feel the history of that contraction. Family now carries both the tenderness of belonging and the weight of expectation, duty, and hierarchy as a linguistic artifact of civilization's shift from circle to structure.

Children learn how to calm down through repetition, especially with a calm, nurturing adult. By modeling emotional balance, we teach them that it's safe to feel upset and that peace can be found again. Each repetition lays a neural pathway, reinforcing regulation through the presence of another. The more often children experience that calm, the more they

will carry it within them for life. Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) pioneered by Daniel Siegel (1999) describes this process as the integration of mind, brain, and relationships. Emotional balance is not an individual achievement; it is an ecological phenomenon within the nervous system. Safety grows through connection, not isolation. In trauma-aware frameworks such as those advanced by Trauma Aware America (n.d.), this insight informs the design of healing spaces: regulation begins not in silence but in safety, not in withdrawal but in co-regulation. You were never meant to carry your emotions alone.

The forest teaches the same lesson. Ecologist Suzanne Simard (2021) transformed forestry science by revealing that trees are not solitary competitors but members of an intricate community. Through her research tracing radioactive carbon isotopes, Simard discovered that birch and fir trees share nutrients via a vast underground fungal network, or the Wood Wide Web. When one tree is shaded or stressed, its neighbors channel resources through the mycorrhizal system to sustain it. Removing “competing” trees disrupted this network, causing the forest to sicken. What appeared to be competition was actually reciprocity. Health, it turns out, depends on communication.

Human attachment functions much the same way. The relational field, our own Wood Wide Web, sustains the emotional and biological equilibrium of the collective. Trauma, neglect, and social isolation sever the connective mycelia that once allowed empathy, safety, and regulation to flow freely between us. Autism, then, may be the body’s signal that these channels have grown thin and that the forest of human relation is losing its underground language. To restore well-being, we must restore the network: reintroducing co-regulation, shared meaning, and emotional reciprocity across all systems of life.

Counter-Argument: The Misreading of Dysregulation and the Colonial Logic of “Normality”

“I think it's funny how people call themselves "autistic" now - when they are actually dismissive avoidant. They think that their mental/emotional issues & hyper-sensitivities are due to this label. Yet they have no idea what autism even is. Nor have they spent any significant amount of time researching anything else that could define their condition instead.

It's like everybody is jumping on this bandwagon where you are entitled, special & magical because you have "autism". But the attitude of turning your insecurities & emotional dysregulation into a superiority complex is a trait-mark of narcissism & it's what dismissive avoidants do. "I'm just feeling really overwhelmed" "I just need a lot of space" "I just can't deal with people or relationships" "I don't know how to read people" "I don't know how to fit in" These aren't just phrases tied to any singular label. These are phrases tied to a dysregulated nervous system that doesn't know how to process or navigate connection. It's a walled up nervous system that has learned that intimacy, vulnerability & connection is "unsafe" - and therefore it is better to create intense sensory overload-reactions - in order to force you into a pattern of avoidance & escapism. This isn't part of being magical, hyper-sensitive or special. This is part of being controlled by your past - in which it was safer to "avoid" your caregivers - rather than address issues with them directly, because your caregivers failed to provide the co-regulation & safety that your system needed to relax. But yeah - better to put the label "autism" on it - seal it as some "starseed" special pedestal-identity and call it a day. Because if you are special, then there is nothing wrong with you. After all - it's "your genetics" and your nervous dysregulation isn't something, you need to work on - but it's something that other people have to "be considerate of" and "give you lots of comfort, pampering & space". This puts the locus of control onto the external - and makes your nervous system a perpetual victim of other people's behavior - and whatever else the world throws at you. #dontfallforit" (Charpantidis, 2025)

In response to this relational model of autism, voices like Georgios Charpantidis (2025) have circulated online critiques arguing that many who now identify as autistic are instead dismissive avoidant individuals mistaking their emotional difficulties for a fashionable label. In his words, "People call themselves 'autistic' when what they actually have is a dysregulated nervous system that learned intimacy is unsafe. They turn avoidance into identity and trauma into entitlement." His post, widely shared on social media, portrays self-identification with autism as a narcissistic escape from personal responsibility, suggesting that hypersensitivity and relational withdrawal reflect moral weakness rather than neurobiological difference.

This argument captures a wider cultural reflex: the need to locate deviance in individuals rather than in systems. Yet it inadvertently reproduces the very misunderstanding it condemns. From an attachment perspective, what Charpentidis describes as “avoidance” is not narcissism but learned adaptation to inconsistent or unsafe caregiving. Ainsworth’s (1978) Strange Situation studies showed that children who appeared detached were physiologically distressed; their avoidance was a strategy to preserve proximity without further rejection. In adulthood, this pattern becomes the dismissive avoidant attachment style, an intelligent defense rather than a character flaw. By moralizing avoidance, the critique enacts what colonial cultures have long done: mistake protective adaptations for pathology.

Empirically, Charpentidis’s assumption that autism is a self-created fad collapses under epidemiological data. Solmi et al. (2022) analyzed global trends across 204 countries and found autism prevalence strongly correlated with industrialization and diagnostic capacity, not self-identification movements. The highest rates occur where social and sensory environments are most fragmented: urban density, overstimulation, and precarious labor. Rather than a bandwagon, the data reveal a civilization increasingly out of relational resonance with itself. Simultaneously, Precedence Research (2023) estimated the economic cost of post-traumatic stress disorder at over USD 460 billion annually, indicating that trauma-related dysregulation is now a defining economic force. When half the global workforce operates in chronic stress physiology, it is predictable that sensitivity will express through both biological and psychological channels.

These empirical findings form what I call the Triangulated Cosmology of Colonial Trauma, a framework connecting body, culture, and economy as mutually reinforcing mirrors. The first axis is the body, shaped by attachment and nervous system learning. The second is the cultural matrix, organized through binaries of normal and abnormal, rational and emotional, inherited from colonial epistemology. The third is the economic structure, which commodifies productivity while externalizing care. Trauma circulates through these three vertices as a self-perpetuating loop: insecure attachment amplifies familial stress, economic pressure produces anxious laborers, and cultural narratives blame individuals for the distress the system induces. Autism’s visibility within this

loop is not accidental; it is the point where the feedback becomes undeniable.

This cultural matrix also governs gender. When you look up symptoms of autism spectrum disorder specific to girls, a frequent behavioral concern cited is “masculine behavior and/or dress” which many attempt to relate to a “male” brain, yet this phenomenon is very easily understood in context of femininity being a set of implicit social rules forced on women. Thus, autistic women being less successful at performing femininity correctly doesn’t relate to the fictitious male brain but is a direct result of any social role being inaccessible to people who have difficulty navigating complex and completely arbitrary social conventions. Their resistance to gender conformity exposes the same mechanism described in the Triangulated Cosmology: a cultural system mistaking authenticity for deviance. When relational intelligence meets a society built on rigid binaries, failure to perform becomes diagnosis. The “male brain” myth, then, is not biology but projection and a reflection of how colonial logic pathologizes all who refuse its scripts.

Autistic people are especially sensitive to the incoherence generated within this Triangulated Cosmology of Colonial Trauma. Their nervous systems seek pattern, efficiency, and internal logic; they need the world to make sense. Yet the colonial matrix depends on contradiction: it asks individuals to perform obedience while preaching freedom, to display empathy within competitive hierarchies, and to conform to roles that fracture authenticity. Within such environments, autistic cognition becomes a kind of truth serum, exposing dissonance that most have learned to ignore. The autistic resistance to performative behavior is not social failure but sensory ethics and a refusal to participate in systems that require self-betrayal for belonging. Basically, we’re allergic to the bullshit that Western culture is selling, because we are biologically and neurologically incapable of buying it. This is precisely why autism becomes visible at the fault lines of body, culture, and economy: it cannot reconcile incoherence, and therefore reflects it back. The so-called rigidity of autistic perception is, in this light, the nervous system’s insistence on integrity in a world organized around contradiction.

Charpantidis’s post, though perhaps well-intentioned, reflects the colonized logic of binary interpretation: either disorder or choice,

sickness or superiority, victim or perpetrator. This binary collapses the continuum of human adaptation into a moral judgment directed at the choices and behaviors of others with the action of judgment disconnecting an individual from the relational field and their empathy. This mechanism underlies and exemplifies the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012): when people from different neurocognitive realities misread each other's signals, each perceives the other as deficient in empathy. From this view, his critique is less an analysis of autism than a symptom of collective misattunement, a nervous system speaking from its own defense. The irony is profound: by accusing others of avoidance, the post performs the avoidance of relational complexity that trauma itself demands.

To visualize this recursive dynamic, I draw on the geometry of the Spirolateral, a mathematical figure formed by repeating a sequence of turning angles that spiral outward before eventually closing into a complete pattern. In trauma theory, the spirolateral becomes a metaphor for recursion with purpose: the psyche repeats its wound, orbit after orbit, until integration closes the figure. Colonial societies remain caught in unfinished spirolaterals of domination, reenacting coercion in every generation until a new relational pathway interrupts the loop. Neurodivergent sensitivity exposes these patterns by refusing to collapse contradiction; it holds the spiral open long enough for consciousness to emerge.

Through this lens, Charpantidis's argument does not undermine the dual-pathway model but inadvertently confirms it. His description of a "walled-up nervous system that learned intimacy is unsafe" is precisely the late-onset pathway identified earlier: trauma-induced hypersensitivity functioning as protection. What differs is interpretation. Where he sees pathology, the dual-pathway model sees intelligent adaptation, the body's effort to regulate in an incoherent world. The colonized mind demands closure and hierarchy; the decolonized nervous system tolerates spiral motion, understanding that healing is nonlinear and collective.

Integration – Healing the Social Nervous System

If autism is the mirror of collective dysregulation, healing cannot be isolated to individuals. It requires environments designed for attunement

so that sensitivity again becomes an asset. This is where Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) and the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) converge. MIT posits that healing occurs when systems face their reflections without repression, and FCP reframes conflict as metabolism rather than malfunction. Together they suggest that difference is not the problem but the pathway to coherence. When societies honor, instead of pathologizing, their most sensitive members, feedback transforms into dialogue.

Polyvagal theory offers the physiological map: safety arises through predictable connection (Porges, 2011). Governance that centers empathy and restorative justice literally regulates the collective nervous system. Conversely, punitive systems keep nations locked in sympathetic arousal, defensive, reactive, and exhausted. As van der Kolk (2014) reminds us, the body stores not only trauma but also the potential for safety. When relational contexts become coherent, minds and bodies follow.

The distinction between genetic and trauma-activated pathways dissolves in recovery. Both converge on the same imperative: rebuild trust at every scale. Genetic sensitivity that once warned of incoherence and trauma-based sensitivity that evolved to survive it can integrate into a new collective intelligence, an empathic civilization capable of self-regulation. Yet integration does not mean uniformity. For many autistic people, especially those whose communication, sensory, or motor systems are profoundly affected, the task is not social adaptation but the restoration of safety and attunement within their own bodies cooccurring with the social adaption of the relational field around them becoming more inclusive, accepting and supportive. Their experiences remind us that all forms of consciousness and intelligence are natural, sacred and honored, and that regulation is not always expressed through words or reciprocity in the conventional sense. Sometimes coherence looks like forms of self-organization that reflect a nervous system working to preserve itself within overwhelming conditions.

Supporting those most affected means widening our concept of communication to include the full sensory language of the human organism: gesture, rhythm, breath, and energy. In this view, the so-called “severe” end of the spectrum is not outside the conversation but the clearest signal of what the collective body has forgotten: unconditional love and value. Their needs are the nervous system’s oldest vocabulary, calling us back

to the original purpose of attachment, which is not conformity but connection.

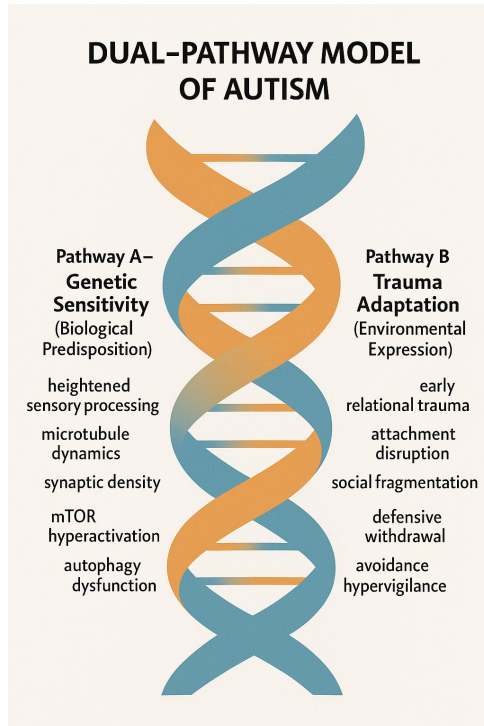
Conclusion

Autism, seen through this synthesis, is neither innate defect nor cultural fad. It is a dialogue between genome and environment, between inherited memory and lived context. Early-onset autism expresses the body's genetic loyalty to coherence; late-onset autism expresses the body's learned insistence upon it. Charpantidis's misreading illustrates why such sensitivity is essential: without it, society confuses pain with weakness and adaptation with indulgence. The nervous system's task is not obedience but truth.

And if, as ecologist Suzanne Simard (2021) showed, trees survive through hidden networks that share nutrients beneath the soil, then perhaps our healing depends on restoring the same kind of relational mycelium. The human nervous system is a forest of connections; it thrives in reciprocity. When one person heals, they transmit safety to others. When families and communities practice attunement, they become carbon exchanges of empathy. Just as birch trees feed shaded firs through the Wood Wide Web, people in coherent relationships nourish the emotional ecosystems around them.

Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel, 1999) reminds us that regulation is not an individual achievement but an ecological event within the mind, body, and relationships. Safety grows in connection, not isolation. Healing does not demand that we harden or suppress emotion; it asks that we rejoin the network we were never meant to leave.

The rising prevalence of autism is not a sign of evolutionary failure but of feedback, a call to restore relational safety. Like the forest reaching through its roots to sustain its weakened trees, we must remember that the health of the whole depends on the strength of its connections. When we listen to what autistic and trauma-sensitive bodies reveal, we hear the same message repeated across every scale of being: heal the relationship, and the system will follow.



Challenging Social Learning Theory: Trauma, Regulation, and Colonial Systems

Social Learning Theory (SLT) rests on four key premises:

- that behavior is acquired through modeling,
- that reinforcement shapes persistence,
- that vicarious learning allows individuals to adopt behaviors by observing consequences for others,

and that this process is a neutral transmission of norms (Bandura, 1977).

This occurs because, within coercive systems, the primary goal of "learning" through modeling and reinforcement shifts from genuine skill acquisition or prosocial development to enforcing conformity and control.

Here's why:

- **Coercive Context:** In environments like authoritarian schools, families that use strict, punitive discipline, or psychiatric systems focused on "correcting" behavior, the underlying dynamic is one of power and control. Compliance is prioritized over autonomy, emotional expression, or authentic relational connection.
- **Rewards for Compliance, Punishment for Resistance:** In these systems, "reinforcement" is not neutral. It is specifically structured to reward behaviors that align with the dominant power structure (e.g., obedience, quietness, suppression of "unacceptable" traits) and punish any deviation or resistance (e.g., meltdowns, questioning authority, non-conformity).
- **Suppression of Authentic Self:** For individuals, particularly those whose natural inclinations or neurotype do not align with the system's norms (like neurodivergent people), "learning" becomes a process of suppressing their authentic self. They learn to mask, hide their true needs, and perform behaviors that gain approval or avoid punishment, rather than genuinely integrating new skills or understanding.
- **Trauma-Driven Compliance:** As mentioned later in this book, this type of "learning" often leads to trauma-driven compliance. The nervous system, under chronic threat or fear of punishment, adapts by prioritizing survival strategies like hypervigilance, dissociation, or outwardly conforming behavior. This isn't true learning in a developmental sense, but rather a protective mechanism.
- **Value-Laden Transmission:** Social Learning Theory (SLT) often assumes a neutral transmission of norms. However, in coercive institutions, the "norms" being transmitted are not value-neutral; they are imbued with the values of the dominant group, often reflecting deficit ideologies that label certain groups or

behaviors as "inferior" or "defiant." Therefore, what is "learned" is often the internalization of these harmful norms and the associated power dynamics.

- **Contrast with Non-Coercive Learning:** In contrast, in environments built on relational safety, attunement, and autonomy, modeling and reinforcement would support genuine growth because the individual feels secure enough to explore, make mistakes, and integrate learning authentically, without the pressure of constant threat or the need to suppress their identity.

These assumptions collapse under scrutiny outside colonial systems. Modeling and reinforcement only function as "learning" when the models themselves are embedded in coercive institutions like schools, families, and psychiatric systems that reward compliance and punish resistance. While this framework has explanatory power in contexts of neutral or prosocial modeling, it becomes limited and even misleading when applied within colonial systems and institutions, and by assuming that observed behaviors are value-neutral, SLT obscures the deeper reality: within coercive social structures, what is being learned is often trauma, disconnection, and compliance to oppressive norms rather than genuine relational competence.

Liedloff's (1977) *The Continuum Concept* shows how Indigenous infants, raised in constant relational contact, naturally develop secure behavior without external reinforcement. By contrast, Ainsworth (1967) found American infants often failed to show distress at separation, not because they learned resilience but because colonial parenting norms had already conditioned them to suppress attachment needs. What SLT calls "adaptive learning" is thus often trauma-driven compliance, shaped by reward systems designed to enforce domination. Neuroscience further undermines SLT's neutrality by showing that trauma fundamentally alters learning and memory processes. Perry and Szalavitz (2017) and van der Kolk (2014) demonstrate that children in chronically unsafe environments encode survival responses such as hypervigilance, dissociation, aggression not through vicarious learning but through nervous system dysregulation.

These responses may later be reinforced, but their origin lies in trauma, not modeling. For example, a child who experiences chronic

unpredictability and fear at home might develop hypervigilance as a trauma response. If, at school, this hypervigilance leads them to notice subtle shifts in a teacher's mood and adjust their behavior to avoid punishment, that avoidance of punishment then reinforces the hypervigilant state. The child "learns" that being constantly on edge helps them navigate unsafe environments, even though the hypervigilance itself originated from their nervous system adapting to trauma, not from a conscious choice to imitate a "hypervigilant model." Similarly, a child who shuts down (dissociates) during overwhelming social situations due to past trauma might later be left alone by peers or adults because they appear "quiet" or "unresponsive." This unintended consequence (being left alone) could reinforce the shutdown behavior as a way to cope with social overwhelm, even though the initial shutdown was a physiological response to an overloaded nervous system, not a learned social strategy. Moreover, cultural norms themselves determine what counts as "adaptive" or "maladaptive." Behaviors like co-sleeping, communal caregiving, or sensory sensitivity may be normalized in one society but pathologized in another, showing that SLT cannot explain variance across cultural contexts. Colonialism functions as a systemic condition that rewires nervous system regulation and reward structures, making SLT's premises appear valid only within coercive, deficit-based societies. Outside such contexts, behavior emerges from relational safety and biological attunement, not from imitation and reinforcement.

Cross-cultural attachment research reveals that SLT cannot account for the variability in what is considered "appropriate" behavior across societies. For example, Mary Ainsworth's studies in Uganda showed that infants expressed immediate and intense distress at separation, whereas American infants already conditioned to forced independence did not (Ainsworth, 1967). SLT would frame the American infant's muted response as a learned adaptation to cultural norms, but this explanation fails to recognize that such "adaptation" is actually the product of early relational trauma and systemic conditioning (Snow, 2025). By treating these patterns as neutral outcomes of observational learning, SLT obscures the coercive foundations of Western childrearing and mistakes trauma-driven compliance for healthy social development.

Further, epidemiological studies of mental health demonstrate how entire societies reproduce maladaptive behaviors and conditions that SLT

cannot explain. The World Health Organization's cross-national study of schizophrenia, for instance, found better long-term outcomes in non-Western societies with relational caregiving structures compared to industrialized nations (WHO, 1979). If SLT were sufficient, Western societies where institutional modeling and reinforcement mechanisms are strong should yield superior outcomes. Instead, the opposite is true: cultures organized around relational safety rather than coercive reinforcement foster healthier developmental trajectories. This evidence supports the claim that SLT is limited to colonial institutional contexts and collapses when tested against societies that prioritize co-regulation and communal care.

The Deficit Delusion and Biased Reinforcement

SLT treats reinforcement as a neutral mechanism through which desired behaviors are shaped. Yet within colonial and deficit-based institutions, reinforcement often rewards compliance with domination while punishing resistance. As Snow (2025) argues, learning is never value-free; it is mediated by deficit ideologies that label children, women, and neurodivergent people as “inferior” or “defiant.” Thus, what SLT frames as “successful social learning” is often the internalization of harmful norms, while acts of resistance are pathologized as failed learning. This reveals that SLT explains not the growth of adaptive skills, but the reproduction of hierarchical control.

Emotional Regulation as the Foundation of Learning

A second limitation of SLT lies in its neglect of the nervous system as the foundation of learning. The theory presumes that modeling and reinforcement are sufficient to explain behavior acquisition. However, neuroscience and trauma studies demonstrate that without co-regulation and felt safety, learning environments produce avoidance, masking, and dissociation rather than healthy social skills (Dana, 2018; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). SLT collapses under the weight of this reality: behavior is not learned in a vacuum but emerges through the quality of relational and physiological safety.

From Individual Learning to Collective Dysfunction

Finally, SLT fails to account for why entire societies normalize harmful behaviors across generations. One prominent example of how society normalizes harmful behaviors across generations, which Social Learning Theory (SLT) struggles to fully explain, is the historical and ongoing practice of "cry-it-out" parenting methods in Western societies. For decades, influential parenting advice, often backed by figures with scientific authority (as mentioned in the document with Rockefeller-backed psychologists), promoted the idea that infants should be left to cry themselves to sleep to foster independence and self-soothing. This practice instructs parents to ignore their infants' distress, despite a baby's cry being a primary means of communicating fundamental needs like fear, hunger, or the need for comfort and safety.

How this normalizes harm:

- **Disruption of Secure Attachment:** This method fundamentally disregards an infant's innate need for co-regulation and responsive caregiving. When cries go unanswered, an infant's nervous system is flooded with cortisol, leading to a learned suppression of emotional expression and a deep-seated feeling that their needs will not be met. This actively undermines the development of secure attachment, which is crucial for healthy emotional regulation and relational capacity later in life.
- **Internalization of Detachment:** Children raised with "cry-it-out" may appear to "self-soothe," but this is often a trauma-driven compliance, where they learn to shut down their distress because their attempts to communicate need are met with neglect. This normalizes emotional detachment and teaches children to defer to authority, suppressing their authentic needs and accepting "power-over" relationships as normal.
- **Generational Transmission:** These practices are then passed down through generations, often seen as a necessary part of "tough love" or effective parenting. Parents who were raised with similar methods may unconsciously replicate them, perpetuating a cycle where emotional suppression and disconnection become embedded in family and cultural norms.
- **Pathologization of Natural Responses:** When infants (or later, adults) exhibit behaviors stemming from this early relational

trauma such as heightened anxiety, difficulty trusting, or suppressed emotional expression, these are often pathologized as individual disorders rather than recognized as a systemic consequence of culturally normalized harmful practices.

SLT might explain how parents "learn" these methods by observing others or through cultural reinforcement. However, it falls short in explaining why an entire society would normalize a practice that contradicts biological imperatives for attachment and leads to widespread relational and emotional dysregulation across generations. This points to deeper systemic issues, such as the influence of colonial-capitalist values that prioritize independence and control over genuine connection and well-being, as highlighted by the Collective Nervous System framework. By focusing on individual modeling, it cannot explain how trauma, coercion, and disconnection are embedded into the very structure of cultural reproduction. Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) and Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) provide this missing layer. These frameworks reveal how unresolved trauma at the collective level mirrors itself in individual dysfunction and vice versa. They demonstrate that what counts as "learned behavior" is not a simple product of observational imitation, but a reflection of societal attempts to stabilize itself through coercion, deficit ideologies, and normalized trauma (Snow, 2025).

Conclusion

SLT's explanatory power is bound to colonial systems, where reinforcement operates through punishment, deficit labeling, and compliance with domination. It cannot explain why entire societies normalize harmful patterns, because it lacks a lens for trauma, systemic coercion, and relational regulation. By contrast, Mirror Integration Theory and the Functional Conflict Perspective reveal that collective trauma structures the very conditions under which learning takes place, shaping not only what is learned but also who we become as societies.

How Autism and Decolonial Theory Are Interrelated

Reframing Neurodivergence as a Sociological Issue, and Maladaptive Behaviors as a Natural Reaction to "Power Over" Relational Dynamics

Autism and decolonial theory may seem, at first glance, to belong to separate realms. One is often framed as a neurological difference. The other is a political and cultural movement to dismantle colonial domination. Yet when viewed through Autistic Standpoint Theory and the Functional Conflict Perspective, along with a Collective Nervous System framework (see *The Collective Nervous System: A Trauma-Informed Framework for Structural and Somatic Analysis*), they reveal themselves as deeply connected. Both challenge systems of coercion, reject imposed binaries, and seek to restore relational integrity in societies fractured by domination.

The Nervous System as a Site of Colonization

Colonialism is not only political and economic. It is also a nervous system project. It operates by shaping bodies and minds to tolerate disconnection, compliance, and control. As Deb Dana has said, “The autonomic nervous system does not work with moral meaning or motivation. It works with survival.” When people, especially children, are placed in environments where autonomy and safety are consistently threatened by someone in power, the survival brain shifts into hypervigilance or shut-down.

Survival brain perceives threat from a perceived loss of autonomy, choice, control, or something or someone above in stature or power. Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent individuals, whose nervous systems are often more sensitive to environmental threat cues, become acutely aware of these coercive dynamics. This sensitivity is not a deficit. It is a

form of relational intelligence that registers power-over relationships as unsafe. Under colonial systems, that sensitivity becomes pathologized. Heightened sensory and emotional responses are framed as maladaptive instead of as accurate readings of a dysregulated and controlling social environment. In this respect, the autistic experience could be seen as a threat to the colonial rule of power, which explains its need to dominate and obfuscate neurodiversity.

The sympathetic nervous system communicates distress through behavior. In fight mode, this looks like defiance, violence, aggression, swearing, growling, or hissing. In flight mode, this looks like elopement, climbing, or school refusal. In freeze mode, this can appear as selective mutism, shut down or social collapse, and hiding. Rather than moralizing this behavior as “bad,” these should instead be interpreted as a nervous system in distress desperately trying to communicate its need for support and co-regulation in potentially harmful or unsafe ways.

Because traditional “power over” discipline typically backfires on autistic and neurodivergent youth, neurodivergence exposes relationships founded on power differentials to be inherently abusive. Western culture produces adults with C-PTSD specifically due to modern parenting practices prioritizing compliance over connection through high demand approaches based on hierarchical systems of control. Dr. Glen Patrick Doyle has pointed out that “the three big common triggers for most C-PTSD survivors are feeling trapped, feeling controlled, and feeling in trouble because they mirror the conditions that make trauma complex: it was inescapable, unfolded over time, and permeated our most important relationships.”

The Collective Nervous System framework helps us understand why this happens at scale. When institutions like education, healthcare, and governance are designed around control instead of co-regulation, they create a social field of chronic threat. Nervous systems adapt to this by normalizing survival states. Autistic people, whose bodies resist this normalization, become living reminders of the damage such systems cause. Dr. Patricia Gently has said that “The overwhelm associated with autism is not a symptom of fragility. It is a fidelity to unfiltered experience. What might this system be capable of, if understood and supported on its own terms? If hyperneuroplasticity is the through-line, then diagnosis

becomes a snapshot of how a system is adapting under particular pressures, not a fixed identity.”

In PTSD and complex PTSD, binary and black and white thinking often emerges as a survival strategy. This all-or-nothing lens that involves seeing the world as either completely safe or completely dangerous offers predictability in an unpredictable environment. For autistic individuals in coercive systems, this pattern can be amplified by sensory overload and repeated social rupture.

Colonialism thrives in environments where emotional nuance is stripped away into binaries and power is centralized. By engineering chronic states of threat, it reinforces rigid thinking and constrains relational imagination. The antidote to this rigidity is not discipline, compliance, or correction. It is repeated experiences of co-regulation with safe and supportive people. Co-regulation is the soil in which nervous systems grow secure and flexible. In Collective Nervous System terms, co-regulation is not just personal. It is relational infrastructure. It is what allows communities, cultures, and even ecosystems to shift out of survival mode into collaborative, creative states.

Social Engineering and the Assault on Attachment

One of the most devastating tools of colonial social control has been the intentional dismantling of secure attachment between caregiver and child. In the United States, Rockefeller-backed psychologists in the 20th century aggressively promoted “cry-it-out” and “self-soothe” methods as modern, scientific parenting. This was not merely misguided advice. It was calculated social engineering. These methods instructed parents to ignore their infants’ cries, framing comfort as indulgence and distress as manipulation. What they did not disclose is that a baby’s cry is not an act of control. It is their only means of communicating fear, hunger, and the need for safety. When those cries go unanswered, the infant’s nervous system floods with cortisol. Over time, the body learns that emotional expression is futile, conditioning children into compliance and emotional shutdown. The result is a population trained from birth to suppress their own needs, defer to authority, and accept power-over relationships as normal.

Mary Ainsworth, whose attachment research in Uganda identified the critical importance of responsive caregiving, found she could not replicate her findings in the United States. By then, attachment baselines had already been culturally damaged. Generations had been raised without consistent co-regulation, producing what colonial systems desire: compliant, disconnected adults who will not challenge the structure.

This disruption is more than personal. It is a Collective Nervous System injury that reverberates through entire societies, shaping emotional norms, political behavior, and cultural expectations for generations. Autism and neurodivergence is the canary in the coalmine that is calling attention to harmful social engineering practices and the damage that “power over” hierarchical social systems do to our collective human behavior and cognitive processes.

Neurodivergence as Decolonial Resistance

Human behavior is non-verbal communication by the nervous system of its unmet needs. Autistic nervous systems, with their heightened attunement to relational authenticity, resist this colonial programming by protesting in the only ways they can, through behavior such as meltdowns, refusal to mask, direct speech, or withdrawal from toxic environments. From a colonial perspective, this resistance is a problem to be corrected. From a decolonial perspective, it is a vital form of relational truth-telling.

Autistic Standpoint Theory names and validates this resistance. It re-frames autism not as a disorder but as a legitimate cultural and cognitive orientation that reveals the fractures in a society built on domination and fear. In this way, autism functions as both a mirror and a warning system. It reflects the coercive nature of dominant norms and signals the urgent need to restore interdependence. Decolonial theory teaches that liberation is not only political but relational. It is about dismantling the internalized colonizer that lives in our nervous systems.

From the standpoint of the Collective Nervous System, behavioral protest is not dysfunction. It is a regulatory impulse in the larger social body, a push toward conditions in which safety, truth, and connection are possible again.

Toward a Regenerative, Decolonial Autism Framework

- If colonialism is a project of enforced disconnection, then both autism advocacy and decolonial work must focus on relational repair. This means:
- Restoring attachment practices that honor the instinctual bond between caregiver and child
- Designing education, healthcare, and governance around co-regulation rather than control
- Rejecting deficit-based models of neurodivergence and embracing it as relational intelligence
- Addressing the historical and ongoing use of psychiatry, psychology, and parenting policy as tools of cultural domination
- Recognizing that repairing the Collective Nervous System is a shared ethical responsibility

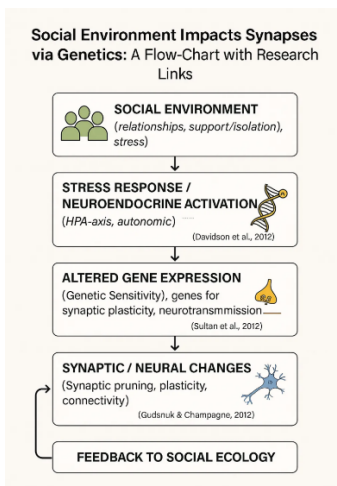
Supportive strategies for parents and authority figures can include low demand and low-pressure approaches, collaborative problem solving and negotiated choices, indirect requests and playful invitations, building in control and autonomy opportunities throughout the day, and prioritizing relationships over compliance.

- **Low Demand and Low-Pressure Approaches:** Instead of a direct command like "Clean your room now," a low-demand approach might be "When you feel ready, we can tackle your room together, or we can just focus on putting away your clothes today." This reduces the immediate pressure and offers flexibility, acknowledging the individual's current capacity.
- **Collaborative Problem Solving and Negotiated Choices:** If a child refuses to do homework, instead of imposing a consequence, a collaborative approach would be, "It seems like homework is really hard right now. What do you think would make it a bit easier? Maybe we can do it in smaller chunks, or pick a different time, or find a quiet spot together?" This empowers the individual to be part of the solution.
- **Indirect Requests and Playful Invitations:** Rather than "Time to turn off the TV and get ready for bed," an indirect request could be, "I wonder what would happen if we turned into sleepy foxes

and snuck off to bed?" or "The pillows are calling your name!" This frames the transition in a less confrontational and more engaging way.

- **Building in Control and Autonomy Opportunities Throughout the Day:** For a child who struggles with morning routines, offer choices like, "Would you like to wear the blue shirt or the green one?" or "Do you want to brush your teeth first or get dressed first?" These small choices give a sense of control over their day, reducing resistance.
- **Prioritizing Relationship Over Compliance:** If a teenager is exhibiting challenging behavior, instead of immediately issuing a punishment, prioritize understanding: "I can see you're really upset right now. I care about you, and I want to understand what's going on, even if we need to talk about the behavior later." This reinforces the foundational relationship and emotional safety before addressing the behavior.

By placing autism within a decolonial frame, we recognize that neurodivergent liberation is not a niche concern. It is part of the larger human struggle to dismantle systems of control and reclaim the capacity for authentic connection. Autism, viewed through this lens, is not a disorder to be cured. It is a culturally vital way of being that challenges the very foundations of colonial power and offers pathways toward a more relational, co-regulated future.

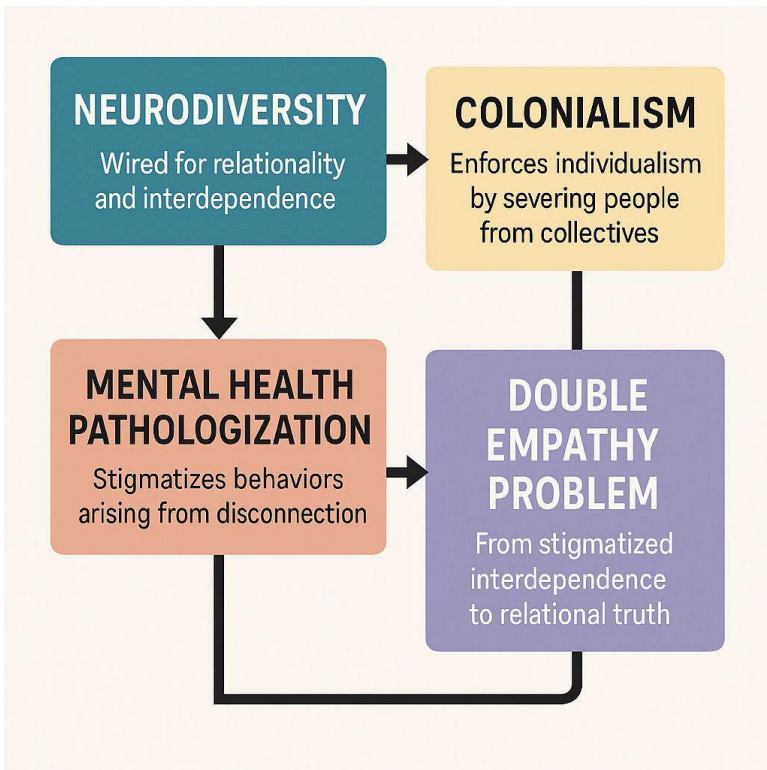


Neurodivergence as Relational Resistance: A Decolonial, Trauma-Informed Reframing of Neurodiversity, Mental Health, and Symbolic Violence

Using a sociological lens, neurodivergence is not a disorder, but a form of relational intelligence currently pathologized under colonial-capitalist systems that prioritize individualism, detachment, and coercive social control. Drawing on theories from Gabor Maté, Stephen Porges, Damian Milton, and Pierre Bourdieu, I reframe the pathologization of neurodivergent individuals as a systemic response to their resistance to social disconnection. This positions neurodivergence as a kind of nervous system sensitivity that is evolutionarily suited for collective regulation and attunement, which colonial systems of symbolic domination seek to sever. The reframing challenges conventional definitions of mental health and reveals the deep ideological violence embedded in psychiatric labeling, education, and social norms.

The double empathy problem, coined by Dr. Damian Milton, suggests that communication breakdowns between autistic and non-autistic individuals are not solely due to deficits in one group. Instead, it proposes that these difficulties arise from a mutual lack of understanding due to differences in social perspectives and communication styles. Essentially, both autistic and non-autistic individuals may struggle to fully grasp each other's experiences and communication cues. The "double empathy problem" isn't just about communication, it's about a systemic failure of relational reciprocity in a society that stigmatizes interdependence. Neurodivergent people are punished for needing what we should all need: connection, attunement, and co-regulation. The real deficit is in a society that normalizes detachment and pathologizes connection-seeking. Neurodiversity is a form of relational intelligence wired for collective regulation and interdependence.

Colonialism enforces individualism by disconnecting people from their communities, thus pathologizing those whose nervous systems resist this disconnection. The mental health system often reinforces this by diagnosing relational trauma as personal pathology. The double empathy problem is not a communication failure; it is the inevitable clash between a dominant culture of detachment and a neurodivergent culture of relational truth.



1. Neurodivergence as Relational Intelligence

Rather than viewing neurodivergent individuals through the deficit model dominant in psychiatry and education, I propose an alternative: that neurodivergence is a nervous system wiring adapted for deep relationality, co-regulation, and collective well-being. Many neurodivergent individuals experience emotional intensity, sensory sensitivity, and heightened responses to relational ruptures, not because they are broken, but because they are deeply attuned to their social environments.

Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory supports this reframing, highlighting that human safety is rooted in co-regulation. Neurodivergent nervous systems may be more actively scanning for cues of safety and danger, and thus more easily dysregulated in the isolating, fast-paced, hyper-individualistic societies of the Global North. Their responses are appropriate to environments that are systemically dysregulated.

Gabor Maté's work on trauma reinforces this idea. He argues that mental illness is not a sign of pathology but a reflection of trauma, disconnection, and unmet relational needs. In this light, neurodivergence can be seen as a survival adaptation in a culture that does not meet basic emotional and relational needs.

2. Colonialism and the Pathologization of Relationality

Colonial systems depend on the severance of people from their kin, land, language, and emotional co-regulation. They manufacture self-reliant, competitive individuals for the purpose of controlling labor and suppressing resistance. This shift away from relational collectivism toward isolation and productivity has shaped Western mental health paradigms.

Within this context, neurodivergent individuals become canaries in the coal mine: they acutely feel the effects of relational disconnection and social incoherence. Their "maladaptive" behaviors often reflect trauma responses to mis attuned environments rather than internal disorder. In fact, their behavior may be deeply appropriate, but inappropriate for a dysfunctional system. When people are punished for being sensitive to detachment, for needing attunement, or for seeking community, it is

not their nervous systems that are disordered, it is the system that deems relationality a problem.

3. Mental Health Diagnosis as Social Control

The DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) pathologizes emotional dysregulation, oppositional behavior, and relational dependency. However, these so-called disorders may be natural reactions to social disconnection, coercive institutions, and unresponsive relationships.

Bessel van der Kolk, Maté, and Porges all argue that trauma resides in the nervous system, and trauma is often the result of unmet relational needs. In colonial-capitalist societies, where speed, productivity, and hierarchy are valued over interconnection and rest, trauma becomes normalized. Mental illness is increasingly recognized as systemic, not individual. Yet systems of care (schools, hospitals, courts) still treat it as personal pathology. This maintains symbolic control over the body and mind, labeling those who resist disconnection as “disordered.”

5. The Double Empathy Problem Revisited

Damian Milton's Double Empathy Problem challenges the view that autistic individuals lack empathy. Instead, he asserts that breakdowns in understanding are mutual and neurotypical people also fail to empathize with neurodivergent, but this is rarely acknowledged. In a trauma-informed, decolonial context, this problem becomes not just interpersonal but systemic. Neurotypical norms uphold detachment, emotional suppression, and individualism. Neurodivergent people often value honesty, relational depth, and co-regulation. The clash is not a communication failure; it is a cultural one. Neurodivergent people are punished for expressing the very things that a healthy society should value: authenticity, emotional attunement, resistance to exploitation. Their needs become seen as excessive, their behaviors as disruptive, only because they do not conform to the norms of disconnection. It's important to revisit the Double Empathy Problem because it fundamentally shifts the perspective on communication breakdowns between autistic and non-autistic individuals. Instead of placing the "deficit" solely on autistic people, it highlights a mutual lack of understanding and a systemic failure of relational reciprocity.

Revisiting this issue helps to:

- **Deconstruct Deficit Models:** It challenges the long-standing (and often harmful) assumption that autistic individuals inherently lack empathy, which has led to pathologizing their experiences and communication styles.
- **Promote Mutual Responsibility:** It encourages non-autistic individuals to also examine their own communication biases and put in the effort to understand neurodivergent perspectives, rather than expecting autistic people to always adapt.
- **Highlight Societal Norms:** It reveals how dominant societal norms, which often prioritize detachment and emotional suppression (as discussed in the document in the context of colonial-capitalist systems), create an environment where neurodivergent ways of being are misunderstood and devalued.
- **Advocate for Inclusive Communication:** By recognizing the systemic nature of the problem, it pushes for the development of more inclusive communication strategies that value diverse forms of relationality and attunement, rather than strictly adhering to neuronormative expectations.
- **Reduce Stigma and Pathologization:** Understanding the Double Empathy Problem can lead to a reduction in the stigma associated with neurodivergence and a move away from diagnosing relational trauma as personal pathology.
- **Foster Authentic Connection:** Ultimately, revisiting this issue is crucial for fostering genuine connection and mutual understanding between autistic and non-autistic people, creating more equitable and supportive social environments.

5. Symbolic Domination and Coercive Control

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic domination explains how power operates subtly through language, norms, and internalized beliefs. Dominated individuals are often unaware of their domination because it is embedded in what they perceive as natural. In the film *Sociology is a Martial Art*, Bourdieu explains how women in patriarchal societies often participate in their own subjugation: "You have to find a way to compel him; there are men of goodwill who are willing to change, but they, too, are unaware of it." He calls this dynamic symbolic violence.

This applies directly to the neurodivergent experience. People learn to suppress their needs, mask their discomfort, and perform neurotypical norms. In doing so, they internalize the belief that their true selves are unacceptable. They become complicit in their own silencing. This is not just a psychological issue. It is political. As Marx once said, “The dominant is dominated by his domination.” Neurotypical culture is also harmed by its disconnection, but it does not recognize the cost. For instance, an autistic individual might internalize the societal expectation that direct communication is “rude” or “lacking empathy,” even though it is their natural communication style. They might then actively try to soften their speech, make more eye contact than is comfortable, or suppress their stims in professional or social settings to avoid being perceived as “difficult” or “disordered.” This constant masking, while appearing to facilitate social integration, comes at a significant cost to their mental health, authenticity, and overall well-being, yet it is often seen as a necessary “adaptation” rather than a consequence of symbolic violence.

Conclusion: Toward a Relational Future

To move forward, we must stop asking how neurodivergent people can better fit into broken systems. Instead, we must ask how our systems can better support the relational needs of all people. Neurodivergence is not a deficit; it is a relational intelligence. By honoring this truth, we resist symbolic violence. We decolonize our approach to mental health. And we take the first step toward a society rooted not in domination, but in mutual care.

Beyond Fear: Rethinking Social Contracts Through Neurodivergent Communication

"As Aristotle said, "Nature abhors a vacuum."

We can't just say, "Not that."

We must say: "Instead, this.""

-Dr. Alexandra Solomon

Western social structures have long been built on transactional agreements rooted in hierarchy, fear, and control. From Hobbes' Leviathan to Popper's Paradox of Tolerance to Rousseau's Social Contract, neurotypical models of sociality have historically emphasized obedience and conformity as mechanisms for maintaining order. For the neurodivergent community, these fear-based social contracts have profound and often detrimental implications. Their very existence challenges the core tenets of conformity and obedience upon which these structures are built. Neurodivergent individuals frequently experience the world and process information in ways that deviate from the "neurotypical" norm, leading to communication styles, social interactions, and sensory experiences that are often misunderstood or pathologized by a society designed for homogeneity through forced conformity. This perceived deviation becomes a threat to the established order, as their "unconventional" behaviors (e.g., stimming, direct communication, intense focus on specific interests, difficulty with social hierarchies) are seen not as natural variations, but as disruptions to social harmony and control.

This historical emphasis on conformity, reinforced by fear and control, can be directly tied to the dark history of eugenics. Eugenics, at its core, sought to "improve" the human race by selectively breeding for desirable traits and eliminating undesirable ones. In Western societies, neurodivergent traits were often, and sometimes still are, deemed

“undesirable.” Early 20th-century eugenics movements, for instance, targeted individuals with intellectual disabilities, autism (though not formally recognized as such at the time, many characteristics would have fallen under broader categories), and other neurodevelopmental differences for institutionalization, forced sterilization, and social exclusion. The logic was that these individuals were a burden on society, inherently less capable of conforming to societal demands, and therefore a threat to the “progress” of the human race.

The enduring legacy of these eugenicist ideas, though often repackaged, can still be seen in contemporary attitudes and practices towards neurodivergence. The pressure to “normalize” autistic individuals through therapies that aim to suppress natural behaviors (like stimming) and enforce neurotypical social norms such as emotional avoidance and suppression, rather than accommodating their needs, echoes the eugenic desire for conformity. The medical model of disability, which views neurodivergence as a deficit to be cured, rather than a natural variation to be understood and supported, further perpetuates this historical bias. When social contracts are built on the assumption that difference is a threat to order, and that fear and control are necessary to maintain that order, neurodivergent individuals become targets for intervention and “correction,” rather than valued members of a diverse society. They’re very being, in this framework, is a challenge to the established power structures and the “neurotypical” ideal, making them vulnerable to marginalization and systemic violence.

However, as emerging research in psychology, anthropology, and sociology demonstrates, these social contracts are not merely the result of rational design but are deeply intertwined with early attachment disruptions, pathologization of neurodivergence, and a rigid adherence to neuronormative communication. This paper argues that neurotypicals must move beyond fear-based sociality and expand their framework to incorporate autistic and neurodivergent modes of communication. This shift would facilitate a cultural evolution from mere survival to collective thriving.

The Evolutionary Basis of Fear-Driven Social Contracts

Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) posits that societal order arises from a need to mitigate violence and ensure survival through a social contract in which individuals surrender autonomy in exchange for security. Locke and Rousseau further developed this notion, emphasizing individual rights and collective governance. However, these models presume that social cohesion depends on the regulation of fear, compliance, and hierarchical structures. Fear, initially a biological necessity for survival, has remained embedded in cultural norms and institutions, shaping concepts of respect and authority (Good, 1997). This rigid adherence to fear-based principles reflects early attachment disruptions, as identified by Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation study (1978), which demonstrated how Western child-rearing practices condition infants to tolerate detachment and suppress distress. This early conditioning correlates with the avoidance and suppression of vulnerability in Western social contracts, reinforcing norms that prioritize control over connection.

Fear, originally adaptive for survival, becomes institutionalized when cultures embed it into systems of respect, morality, and authority. In the Christian church, fear has historically been framed as "fear of God," a reverence linked to obedience, humility, and submission to divine authority. This framing often extended into church hierarchies, where questioning leaders was equated with spiritual rebellion, reinforcing authority through fear of punishment or exclusion. In the contemporary U.S., the rise of Christian nationalism illustrates how this dynamic persists. Political and religious leaders invoke fear of moral decline, loss of national identity, or divine judgment to consolidate authority and mobilize followers. In both cases, fear becomes less about biological survival and more about cultural survival, shaping social order by positioning obedience as safety and dissent as danger. This reflects Good's (1997) insight: fear is not just an individual emotion but a systemic cultural tool for structuring respect and legitimizing power.

Sociality as a Function of Cultural Evolution

Culture serves as an evolutionary strategy for survival, shaping social behaviors that facilitate cooperation and mutual understanding (Good, 1997). However, current Western cultural norms reflect a maladaptive

model that prioritizes hierarchy and dominance over inclusivity and reciprocity. In contrast, non-Western and collectivist cultures demonstrate alternative frameworks for social contracts, where interdependence and mutual responsibility are emphasized (Honwana, 1997). The World Health Organization's (WHO) cross-cultural studies on schizophrenia (1976) provide a compelling case for re-examining the role of culture in social contracts. Findings indicated that individuals with schizophrenia in non-Western societies had significantly better prognoses than their Western counterparts, largely due to the presence of extended familial support networks and flexible social expectations (Sartorius et al., 1986). Likewise, studies on PTSD indicate that the presence of a single safe, stabilizing individual is the single most mitigating and determining factor as to whether an individual develops PTSD following a traumatic event. These studies serve as theoretical evidence for the shared Collective Nervous System (CNS) model.

Fear Responses to Mental Illness and the Social Consequences

A critical factor in the marginalization of neurodivergent individuals is the pervasive fear response to mental illness. Research has shown that Western societies often react to mental illness with avoidance, coercion, or even criminalization rather than support and integration (Good, 1997). Fear-driven responses to individuals with mental health challenges perpetuate stigma and exclusion, leading to increased involuntary commitments and misdiagnoses, particularly among minority populations (Lindsey & Paul, 1989). This fear-driven model aligns with early childhood conditioning in Western societies, where children are often taught to associate respect with obedience rather than mutual understanding. Research by Loring & Powell (1988) indicates that behaviors of children with mental health issues are frequently perceived as threatening rather than communicative, further entrenching cycles of exclusion.

Behavior as Communication: The Neurodivergent Challenge to Neuronormativity

One of the most profound contributions of neurodivergent perspectives is the reframing of all behavior as communication. The Western medical model, as critiqued by Good and others, often pathologizes behavior that does not conform to neurotypical expectations, failing to

recognize the communicative intent behind it. Autistic individuals frequently engage in direct, unfiltered expression, whether through echolalia, stimming, or alternative forms of social reciprocity that neurotypicals misinterpret as inappropriate or disruptive. High rates of misdiagnosis among ethnic minorities in the United States, as detailed in Good's research, demonstrate how the pathologizing of communication is often culturally and socially constructed. Just as African Americans are disproportionately diagnosed with schizophrenia due to clinician bias, autistic individuals are routinely misread through a deficit model that assumes deviation from neurotypicality equals dysfunction.

Echolalia

Echolalia is the unsolicited repetition of vocalizations made by another person (immediate echolalia) or the repetition of phrases or sentences previously heard (delayed echolalia). It is common in individuals with autism and can serve various functions, including communication, self-regulation, or processing information.

Stimming

Stimming, short for self-stimulatory behavior, refers to repetitive physical movements or vocalizations. Examples include hand-flapping, rocking, repeating words or phrases, or focusing intently on sensory input. Stimming is often used by neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with autism, as a way to self-regulate, cope with overwhelming sensory input, express emotions, or manage anxiety.

Alternative Forms of Social Reciprocity

Alternative forms of social reciprocity refer to ways in which neurodivergent individuals engage in social interaction and exchange that may differ from neurotypical expectations. This can include:

Direct and unfiltered communication: Prioritizing honesty and clarity over social niceties or indirect cues.

- Parallel play or activity: Engaging in separate activities alongside others, deriving connection from shared presence rather than direct interaction.

- Shared special interests: Forming deep connections through intense focus on common interests, often leading to detailed and extensive conversations.
- Different non-verbal cues: Using eye contact, body language, or facial expressions in ways that may not align with neurotypical norms but are still communicative within their own context.
- Need for processing time: Taking longer to respond in social situations, indicating a different pace of social engagement rather than a lack of interest.

These forms of reciprocity challenge the idea that there is only one "correct" way to interact socially, highlighting the diversity in human connection.

Evolving Beyond Transactional Social Contracts

If Western social contracts are to evolve beyond their current transactional, fear-driven nature, they must incorporate neurodivergent ways of being into the mainstream. This means moving beyond simply accommodating neurodivergence within existing structures and instead fundamentally rethinking how sociality itself is structured. Neurotypical individuals must actively work to understand and engage with autistic and neurodivergent communication styles. An expanded social contract rooted in interdependence rather than coercion requires a shift in the very foundations of Western cultural logic. Instead of viewing respect as submission to authority, respect must be reframed as mutual attunement. Instead of seeing differences in communication as deficits, they must be recognized as valid and valuable ways of engaging with the world.

Practical Steps for Neurotypicals to Understand and Engage with Neurodivergent Communication Styles

To foster a more inclusive and effective communication environment, neurotypical individuals can take the following concrete steps:

Active Learning and Education

- Seek out Neurodivergent Voices and Resources: Prioritize learning directly from autistic and neurodivergent individuals.

This includes reading books, articles, and blogs written by neurodivergent authors, listening to podcasts, and engaging with online communities.

- **Educate Themselves on Common Neurodivergent Communication Differences:** Familiarize themselves with prevalent communication styles such as directness, literal interpretation, echolalia, stimming as communication, and varying non-verbal cues. Understand that these are not deficits but alternative ways of expressing and processing.
- **Understand Sensory Sensitivities:** Learn about common sensory differences and how they can impact communication and interaction. This includes recognizing that certain environments or stimuli can be overwhelming, affecting an individual's ability to engage.

Adapting Communication Practices

- **Be Direct and Explicit:** Use clear, unambiguous language. Avoid idioms, sarcasm, implied meanings, or excessive social niceties that can be confusing. State intentions and expectations plainly.
- **Take Words at Face Value:** Unless there's a clear indication otherwise, assume that neurodivergent individuals mean exactly what they say. Avoid reading between the lines or inferring hidden motives.
- **Allow for Processing Time:** Understand that some neurodivergent individuals may require more time to process information and formulate responses. Be patient and avoid interrupting or rushing their contributions.
- **Provide Information in Multiple Formats:** Offer information visually (e.g., written instructions, diagrams), verbally, and through examples to cater to different processing styles.
- **Respect Non-Verbal Communication Differences:** Recognize that eye contact, body language, and facial expressions may differ from neurotypical norms. Do not interpret these differences as disinterest, disrespect, or a lack of engagement.
- **Create Structured and Predictable Interactions:** When possible, establish clear agendas for meetings or conversations. Provide

advance notice of topics and expectations to reduce anxiety and improve participation.

- **Actively Listen and Seek Clarification:** Practice empathetic listening without judgment. If something is unclear, ask clarifying questions directly and respectfully (e.g., "Could you explain what you mean by that?" or "Just to be sure I understand, are you saying...?").

Fostering an Inclusive Environment

- **Prioritize Psychological Safety:** Create spaces where neurodivergent individuals feel safe to communicate authentically without fear of judgment, correction, or punishment for their natural communication styles.
- **Challenge Personal Biases:** Reflect on and actively work to dismantle internalized biases and assumptions about neurodivergent intelligence, social skills, and capabilities.
- **Advocate for Systemic Change:** Support the implementation of policies and practices in workplaces and social settings that accommodate neurodivergent needs rather than expecting assimilation.

Benefits for Neurotypicals

By actively engaging with and understanding neurodivergent communication styles, neurotypical individuals will gain significant benefits, including:

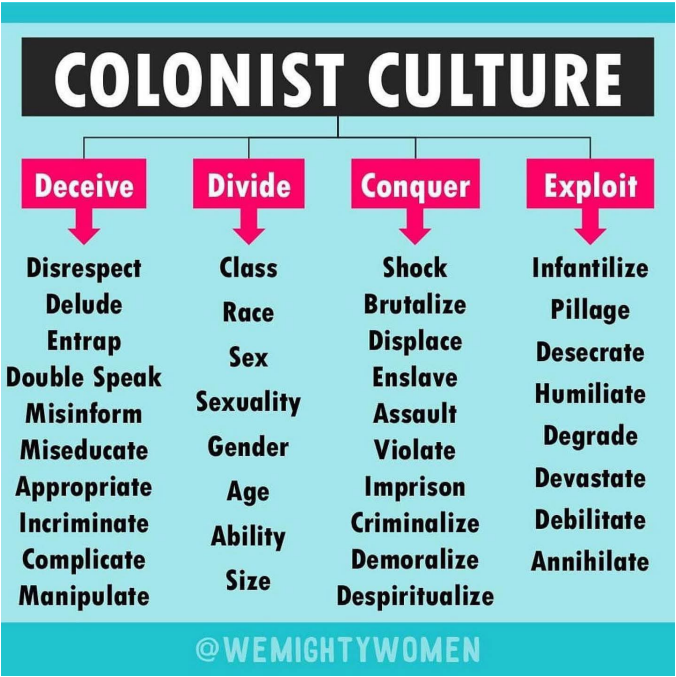
- **Enhanced Communication Skills:** Developing the ability to communicate more directly, clearly, and empathetically, which improves interactions with all people, not just neurodivergent individuals.
- **Increased Innovation and Creativity:** Exposure to diverse thought processes and problem-solving approaches can spark new ideas and foster a more innovative environment, leading to better solutions and outcomes.

- **Richer Relationships:** Building deeper, more authentic connections based on genuine understanding and mutual respect, moving beyond superficial social exchanges.
- **Greater Cognitive Flexibility:** Expanding their own cognitive frameworks and becoming more adaptable in diverse social and professional settings, reducing rigid thinking and confirmation bias.
- **Reduced Misunderstandings and Conflict:** Minimizing communication breakdowns and the frustration that often arises from differing communication styles, leading to more harmonious interactions.
- **Improved Problem-Solving:** Gaining access to alternative perspectives that can identify nuances and patterns often missed by neurotypical thinking, leading to more comprehensive solutions.
- **Personal Growth and Empathy:** Cultivating a deeper sense of empathy and a broader understanding of the human experience, challenging preconceived notions of "normalcy."
- **More Effective Leadership and Collaboration:** For those in leadership roles, this understanding foster more inclusive teams, higher employee engagement, and ultimately, a more productive and satisfied workforce, as highlighted by the benefits of a "bottom-up" management style.
- **Contribution to a More Equitable Society:** Playing an active role in dismantling neurotypical supremacy and creating a society that values all forms of human neurocognitive diversity, enriching the collective human experience.

Conclusion

The fear-based, hierarchical nature of Western social contracts is not an inherent or necessary feature of human sociality but rather a consequence of disrupted early attachment, industrialized isolation, and a rigid insistence on neuronormativity. Neurotypicals have the opportunity and the obligation to expand their social framework to include autistic and neurodivergent ways of being because this shift would facilitate a cultural evolution from mere survival to collective thriving. Trauma-

informing Western social norms would not only dismantle oppressive and exclusionary systems but would also lay the groundwork for a culture that prioritizes mutual thriving over survival-driven control. The challenge is not for neurodivergent individuals to assimilate into a dysfunctional system, but for neurotypicals to level up socially, moving beyond outdated models of fear and domination toward a new paradigm of communication, respect, and human connection.



Affirmative Action in Hiring Veterans/Disabled

Written with Trevor Melton, Isabella Rich, Kaven Winters, and
Karisma Vega



The different ways that brains process information result in two distinct communication styles between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Miscommunications occur when managers are unaware of these differences, resulting in an unproductive workforce and unhappy employees. Neurology cannot be trained, beaten, bullied, or disciplined out of someone. Being neurodivergent is a primary part of one's identity or a characteristic that an individual has no choice over, such as one's age, mental or physical ability, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, and gender. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it illegal to discriminate against race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Discrimination is a result of stereotypes and prejudice. Given that having a neurodivergent identity is never a choice, and falls under the category of a primary identity characteristic, this paper contends that the Civil Rights

Act should be amended to also include neurodiversity. If the United States government mandated policies of inclusivity and shifted its corporate cultures to a perspective of embracing and empowering neurodivergent people, the United States government would find a hidden powerful asset among neurodivergent people. Neurodivergent people would exceed expectations when given a working environment that caters to neurodivergent strengths. Knowledge of these differences in communication could increase productivity and overall happiness, resulting in greater revenue for businesses.

From our Human Relations textbook: “Behaving socially responsibly can help a company save money” (Dias, 2012). Steve Silberman, author and activist said that “Neurodiversity is the future of innovation and progress.” A public policy allowing the neurodiverse to authentically have the space they need in order to function, work, and learn, would lower their rate of suicide and depression. This policy change would not just help the workplace, it would help the entire country (National Library of Medicine, 2019).

Sociologist Manual Castells (1998) created the term "fourth world nation" to describe stigmatized minority groups that are denied a political voice all over the globe, such as the neurodivergent population. Judy Singer, author, and activist stated that “Neurodiversity is not just a matter of social justice, it is a matter of human rights.” The Century Foundation, one of the oldest public policy research institutes in the country, reports that “Labor rights are rooted in fundamental constitutional rights—from First Amendment freedoms of speech and association, to Fifth Amendment protections from unlawful takings, to Thirteenth Amendment freedoms from involuntary servitude. There has grown a trend whereby labor’s foes have perversely used these constitutional rights against labor. The trend is displayed most often in the push for so-called “right-to-work,” which prevents unions from collecting fair-share fees to cover the expenses germane to collective bargaining” (Century Foundation, 2017). This discussion on unions and "right-to-work" laws fits into the broader discussion about neurodiversity by highlighting how existing systems, designed with a "top-down" hierarchical approach, often disadvantage vulnerable groups by stripping them of collective power and reinforcing individualistic norms.

- **Vulnerability and Exploitation:** This essay argues that "bottom-up" workplace enforcement may fail to protect the most vulnerable workers if they lack legal knowledge and incentives. Similarly, "right-to-work" laws, by weakening unions, can leave individual workers, including neurodivergent individuals, more vulnerable to exploitation and less able to advocate for their rights and specific needs without collective bargaining power.
- **Systemic Disadvantage:** Just as "right-to-work" laws are presented as a tool that labor's "foes" use to undermine collective worker power, this essay posits that the current "top-down" corporate culture and government policies are "labor's foes" against neurodivergent people. Both scenarios illustrate how systemic structures can be designed to maintain existing power differentials rather than to create equity.
- **Lack of Collective Voice:** Unions provide a collective voice for workers, enabling them to negotiate for better conditions, including accommodations and fair treatment. When this collective voice is suppressed, as in "right-to-work" states, individual workers, especially those with non-conforming needs like neurodivergent individuals, are left to navigate a system that isn't built for them, individually. This mirrors the struggle of neurodivergent people who are often expected to adapt to neurotypical norms rather than having systems adapt to their needs.
- **Reinforcing Individualism vs. Interdependence:** The "right-to-work" push emphasizes individual choice over collective action, which aligns with this book's critique of colonial-capitalist systems that prioritize individualism and detachment. Conversely, the argument for neurodiversity advocates for relationality, co-regulation, and interdependence. Unions, in their ideal form, represent a collective, interdependent approach to workplace well-being, directly contrasting with the individualistic burden placed on neurodivergent individuals in an unaccommodating system.
- **Historical Parallels to Meritocracy and Rights:** The text explicitly draws a parallel between the historical expansion of rights for women, minorities, and the working class, and the need for

similar recognition for neurodivergent individuals. It suggests that just as these groups needed collective action and legal frameworks to challenge existing "aristocratic societies" and "inherited land elite," neurodivergent people require systemic changes (like amending the Civil Rights Act and implementing "bottom-up" management) to overcome "institutionalized neurotypical supremacy." The fight against "right-to-work" laws is another iteration of this ongoing struggle for worker rights and fair treatment within a historically unequal system.

Including the neurodiverse community in the workplace is nearly effortless. To help a dyslexic employee, all that is needed is a font that has a heavier weight on the right half of the characters. This font is free to the public, but few books get printed in it. If the tool needed to aid a handicap is of no cost and no resource, then not using it or not providing it for those who would benefit is almost worse than exclusion. The education is available for accommodating the neurodiverse population, and the knowledge is free. But while the knowledge may be free, its application in the workplace might not be, leading to employer reluctance to shift policy. Until there is inclusivity in the workplace, corporate culture will always be an ableist and traumatic experience for neurodivergent people. Inclusivity includes facilitating and playing to the strengths of the neurodivergent without an expectation for them to mask as a neurotypical person. Expecting a neurodivergent to perform and communicate as a neurotypical is like asking water to be fire; acceptance is the bare minimum. This population needs to be included and empowered. Nick Walker, author and activist said "Neurodiversity is not about changing people. It's about changing society's perception of people."

Thesis statement:

The United States government enables businesses and organizations to discriminate against the neurodiverse population by neglecting to create inclusive policies, not because it is in the nations or a company's best interest, but because it facilitates preexisting institutionalized neurotypical supremacy. Fostering a culture of inclusivity by utilizing a bottom-up style of both managing and communicating in the workplace will lead to increased innovation and a healthier, more profitable, and more productive environment.

Introduction:

Two ways of processing, top down and bottom up, will result in two very different ways of communicating. Not understanding these differences ends up costing businesses every year in revenue and workers in productivity. Revenue and productivity both can be increased dramatically through understanding the ways that employees process information and learning to accommodate them.

Body:

The neurodiversity movement is a social movement that acknowledges that everyone is different. It views neurotypicalism, the ideal of neurocognitive functioning, as being a socially constructed norm. The neurodiversity paradigm views no one type of brain function as being “right” or “best,” and sees neurodiversity as a natural variation in neurocognitive functioning (Goldberg, 2023). The terms neurodivergent and neurodiverse can be used interchangeably. This project proposes defining a neurodiverse person as an individual who experiences the world intensely because of a higher number of neuronal connections and more electrical activity in the nervous system than is typically found in Western society, and who processes information in the order of energy/sensation first and words/cognitive second (known as bottom up processing). The neurodivergent umbrella is ever expanding and includes Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, BPD, DID and OSDD, NPD, ASPD, Bipolar, Epilepsy, OCD, ABI, Tic Disorders, Dyslexia, C-PTSD, Dyspraxia, Schizophrenia, Misophonia, HPD, Sensory Processing Disorder, Dyscalculia, Down Syndrome, PTSD, Dysgraphia, and Synthesia. (Lived Experiences Educator, 2019)

A neurotypical is an individual whose brain does not differ from the statistical norm, which for the purposes of this paper will be defined as an individual who uses “top down” thinking, one which draws on prior learning and experiences, as opposed to the neurodivergent “bottom up” way of approaching their environment, viewing details before concepts. These different ways of thinking result in different ways of communicating as well, and ultimately result in two separate styles of managing a business, a top down being a hierarchical approach where decisions are made by leaders at the top, and a bottom-up approach of leadership

where all teams and individuals have a voice. System theories provide a framework for understanding how complex systems work through the study of how interrelated and interdependent components comprise a larger unified whole, and could account for the primary reason why our most common managerial style in business. A top-down approach closely resembles the current hierarchical structure of the federal government in the United States, which is a top-down system. Top-down styles of communication also predominate as the “neurotypical” accepted manner of speech, whereas neurodiverse bottom-up communication, which seeks to identify underlying behaviors communicating unmet needs, challenges this culturally accepted norm. In a top-down communication style, a manager might say, "Give me these reports completed by end of day," without offering context or inviting questions. This direct instruction emphasizes authority and expects compliance, reflecting a hierarchical approach where information flows primarily from the top down. In contrast, a bottom-up approach would involve the manager saying, "We need these reports for our presentation tomorrow. What's your current workload like, and how can I support you in getting these done? Perhaps we can break down the tasks or prioritize certain sections." This opens a dialogue, acknowledges the employee's perspective, and fosters collaboration rather than strict obedience.

Affirmative action attempts to equalize unfairness that is caused by society's mistreatment of groups of people. People of color, women, and the disabled among others, but this project contends that affirmative action and equality are not actually possible within a hierarchical top-down approach due to the system being founded upon institutionalized privileges and inequalities. In order for true equality to exist, a new system of government must be built based upon a bottom up or reverse hierarchical approach, where everyone has equal access to education, knowledge, skills, and opportunities. The first step to achieving equality is to protect neurodivergents against discrimination in the workplace and follow through on that promise by creating policies mandating bottom-up style management within America's corporate culture.

The neurotypical versus neurodiverse communication styles can be broken down as follows: Logical vs. Emotional; Concrete vs Abstract; Absolutist vs. Relative; and Avoidant vs. Insistent (Forbes, 2017).

Logical vs. Emotional:

- Neurotypical (Logical): "The project needs to be completed by Friday to meet the deadline." (Focus on objective facts and outcomes.)
- Neurodivergent (Emotional): "I'm feeling really overwhelmed by this project deadline, and it's making it hard to focus." (Focus on internal emotional experience as part of the communication.)

Concrete vs. Abstract:

- Neurotypical (Abstract): "Let's brainstorm some innovative solutions for this challenge." (Expects a discussion of broad concepts and ideas.)
- Neurodivergent (Concrete): "Can you give me specific examples of the 'innovative solutions' you're looking for, or a step-by-step process we can follow?" (Prefers clear, tangible details and specific instructions.)

Absolutist vs. Relative:

- Neurotypical (Relative): "Could you try to get this done as soon as possible?" (Implies flexibility and context-dependent urgency.)
- Neurodivergent (Absolutist): "Does 'as soon as possible' mean by the end of today, or sometime this week?" (Seeks clear, definitive parameters and specific timelines.)

Avoidant vs. Insistent:

- Neurotypical (Avoidant): (After a disagreement) "Let's just move past this and focus on the task at hand." (May prefer to drop sensitive topics to maintain surface-level harmony.)
- Neurodivergent (Insistent): "I need to understand why that happened so we can prevent it from recurring." (May persist in discussing issues to ensure clarity, resolution, or understanding, even if it causes discomfort.)

Top-down processing occurs when inferences are made based on a general idea, and when something that overlaps to define the whole of

what is being taken in. It is a concrete-driven act of processing that is dependent upon the previous parts of information to clarify data. The top-down approach to thinking incorporates an embracing belief, rule, or law to deduce something about a particular instance or circumstance, and is dependent upon connections from past experiences and memories. For example, a top-down approach to reading can be thought of as taking in the whole of the paragraph instead of deciphering each word separately. Bottom-up thinking is said to take place through a process of taking in details and building up from there. The fragmented bits and pieces are structured and categorized, and then an induction is made, a process that brings rise to something. This thinking style involves formulating connections with other examples to make sense of what is occurring, and then capturing the commonalities between the connections into something concrete. In total, the bits and pieces are being reassembled into something that makes sense and leads to a resulting conclusion (Ciampi, 2017).

Solange Nicole said, “There's nothing more debilitating about a disability than the way people treat you over it.” Neurodiverse individuals face many challenges when attempting to enter the workforce. The stress of placing demands on already stressed nervous systems can create new mental health issues or worsen existing ones. There is a significant lack of services and resources available for all adult neurodiverse (ND) populations as soon as they age out of schooling (NeuroHomes, 2021). The neurodiverse might find it harder to communicate and socially interact with typical people. These people are unemployed as a result. Divergent people frequently work jobs that many typical people turn their backs on after graduating high school. Neurodiverse people are seen to be more than capable of executing jobs when given the chance to be recruited. They contribute greatly to their workplace once given the chance to share ideas, thoughts, and their drive to get the job done. In fact according to ADHS (Australia's Department of Human Services), when comparing testing results of neurotypical and neurodiverse people, neurodiverse people tested 30% higher in productivity than any other group tested. One problem that prevents this group from moving up further in occupations, and poses an issue for them to easily slip under the radar when applying to large companies, is the standardization of systems set in place today. This can make it very difficult for neurodivergent people to

be recruited. It hinders them from being able to get a job done when their needs are overlooked in the workplace. It can make it difficult to be promoted to higher positions, and make it almost impossible to grow and flourish within their own company. (Harvard Business Review, 2017) An estimated 700,000 people in the United Kingdom are on the spectrum, but only a scant 16% of this total are working full-time (Fleximize).

Companies should be actively seeking to recruit the neurodiverse because they tend to have large IQs and often have specialized skills. Neurodiverse people process greater quantities of information and have incredible attention to detail, and can make patterns and connections that a typical person might miss. They have a tendency to hyperfocus, which means they can work and concentrate intently for long periods of time without interruption. Another positive is their ability to think from the bottom up. This is a good example of outlining the benefits society gains from adapting to the neurodivergent community. While the top-down approach is considered the standard, it is often corrupted by confirmation bias (Wright, 2020). Cognitive diversity drives better performance and limits groupthink within organizations. There are huge benefits to hiring the neurodiverse, why aren't we doing more as a society to accommodate them in the workforce? One reason is neurotypical privilege. Because America is built for and favors a specific neurology, neurodivergent people are excluded (Bouckley, 2022). Dana Baker of Washington State University, in her article titled, 'The Politics of Neurodiversity: Why Public Policy Matters' discusses reasons why it is important to challenge neurotypical privilege. She quoted Ari Ne'eman, the founder of the nationally recognized Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN), who "like many modern disability activists, sees challenges relating to disability as resulting primarily from discrimination and from a failure to effectively support the celebration of different ways of being human" (Baker, 2013). Another positive to businesses accommodating neurodiversity is by taking the necessary steps to make working environments more inclusive for individuals, the gates are opened for a more inclusive workforce. Greater diversity can make companies eligible for the government's Disability Confident scheme which will make a business more attractive to future employees (Fleximize).

Communication helps build strong relationships with customers and colleagues, which accelerates closing deals while providing customers

with tailored solutions that meet their needs. This results in satisfied customers who are more likely to make future purchases (Seth, 2023). Labor burden is a crucial concept for running a profitable company and refers to company costs that go above and beyond employee wages. David Grossman reported in “The Cost of Poor Communications,” that a survey of 400 companies with 100,000 employees each cited an average loss per company of \$62.4 million per year because of inadequate communication to and between employees. Debra Hamilton asserted, in her article “Top Ten Email Blunders that Cost Companies Money,” that miscommunication costs even smaller companies of 100 employees an average of \$420,000 per year (SHRM, 2018). A Gallup study of nearly 200 organizations reported that companies with the highest levels of employee engagement were 22% more profitable and 21% more productive than those with low levels of engagement (Push, 2021). Companies who switch to a bottom-up style of management can help relieve the losses and lack of employee engagement.

The word privilege refers to special advantages that one group has over another group, such as when a subculture is forced to acclimate to cultural norms within a larger group which dictates what is considered typical within a collective system. Neurotypical privilege places the burden and responsibility for performing the emotional labor of learning to communicate beyond their abilities on the shoulders of the neurodivergent individual, who already suffers from a taxed nervous system that is under constant stress due to living in a world that isn’t built to accommodate their needs. The information currently available to increase better communication between bottom up and top-down communicators often targets the neurodivergent individual, such as in the book “The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Power of Your Differently Wired Brain,” by Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D. (Armstrong, 2011). Accessibility is proactive and strives to remove barriers during the design stage of an event, program, or service. Accommodation is reactive and strives to remove barriers caused by inaccessible design. This ensures people with disabilities have the same access as people without disabilities. Businesses could save millions of dollars every year by being proactive and learning how to communicate with bottom-up thinkers and by making their companies more accessible, they create more opportunities for employment and diversity in the workforce.

On September 28, 2023, a personal interview was conducted for this paper with Ms. Jacqueline Lewis, who works in a middle management position in the retail pet food industry at a store located in Nevada. She related the following information:

"All of my coworkers are neurodivergent. All of our bosses are neurotypical and allistic. I have been elected chief of communications because the communication barrier is that bad. Our bosses don't say what they mean. "Can you come in for a bit until relief shows?" really means "can you work a whole shift/open to close at the last minute? I don't want to." We had to make a huge group chat just to notify each other of price increases because they forget we have no way of knowing unless they tell us, and when they tell us they always tell the one who is not working that day. What should take 4 seconds to get a price takes 3 days because they refuse to be organized or efficient. They don't even know who works for them, at what store, at what hours, or at what wage. We are all acting outside our pay grade because they are bad at managing neurodivergence. They had a huge problem with a coworker's performance and wouldn't say why. They just cut his hours without warning. All I did was be straight up and offer suggestions. Now they think I have management skills. I do, but I'm not a manager. They think I'm instrumental and that losing me would damage them when all I do is say please and keep instructions short. Before I realized all my people were neurodivergent like me and just needed things simplified in instructions/needed some teamwork to do the big daunting things, sales increased from around 600 a day to over 2k a day steadily for 6 months now and climbing.

Neurodivergent people think literally. We need our management to say what they mean the first time. Not talk to us like kids in a patronizing way, but in the sense of straightforward speech instead of fluff to soften it. If a compliment sandwich is getting used, it should be short. "I like your initiative with inventory. But I need you to be more mindful of your time punches. Your attendance is fantastic." If we're doing something wrong, we need to be told or it's gonna keep happening. We don't need to yell or lecture. A simple "phones are only out for work reasons" is enough. We hate good labor being rewarded with more labor. Give us money instead so we can feed off of some unexpected dopamine. And praise. A tiny compliment or being noticed for the little contributions goes so far. I complimented the same coworker on his efforts for

checking dates and he made spreadsheets with his motivation. When not praised, we feel unnoticed and unimportant, and that's why my manager cries in her car after work. Everything would be a lot more productive and a lot more profitable if they could talk to us or treat us the way we need, but they don't have the empathy or emotional intelligence for that, so it takes literal days for tasks that should take minutes because we have to do a lot of guesswork to meet them where they want us to meet them. And for very little compensation."

The neurodivergent nervous system is vulnerable and sensitive. Neurodivergent people struggle to adapt to change, stress, and conflict (Neff, 2023). Many neurodivergent people have not only sensory processing differences but also language processing and communication differences. They are asked to learn to channel their nervous energy into positive energy, to present information logically, and to read and use body language effectively, all while seeming approachable and conversational. The most common communication differences are oversharing, under-sharing, speaking anecdotally, being blunt/direct, having a high need for specificity, difficulty describing emotions (alexithymia) or physical sensations, and situational mutism. Executive dysfunction and a need for structure also have a communication component (Associated Bodywork and Professionals, 2023). Neurodiverse people work to understand neurotypical people and to make themselves understood when interacting with them, and neurotypical people need to do the same amount of work (which might feel like more, because they're not used to it). When someone speaks, a divergent person processes the words, then has to consciously remember to manually interpret the facial expression, tone, and body language, and then assign importance to each factor. A neurotypical person immediately, and unconsciously processes all the non-verbal cues and unconsciously assigns them more importance than the words. Neither partner can change the way their brain works, so both need to keep in mind that their partner processes information differently. Helpful communication tips for neurodiverse and neurotypical people include having arguments over writing, allocating time for each person to speak, and using a color system to code preferences and needs. An article from Forbes magazine recommends that employers maximize communication channels and techniques by being cognizant of text-heavy emails and focusing on how to convey information that is concise, informative, and

sensitive (Kurter, 2020). Other tips for employers include being direct in communication, avoiding making assumptions about feelings and intentions, giving explicit details and instructions, allowing and answering questions, taking words at face value, reducing social expectations, understanding that neurodiverse individuals have variable functioning and have fluctuating energy levels, keeping in mind their justice orientation when strictly adhering to rules, refrain from unnecessary interruptions, evaluating employees based on skill level and not personal likability, and resisting the urge to encourage conformity. (Specialisterne, 2023) Some common sense rules for companies to follow are to be nice, be patient, listen carefully, pay attention, and instruct nicely (Healthline, 2017).

Employee engagement is important because it improves loyalty and satisfaction, improves performance and increases retention, lowers absenteeism, leads to a happier healthier workplace, and improves profitability. Communication is important for employee engagement because good communication keeps businesses moving forward and allows every member of the team to be heard. It helps leaders to understand their team members' needs, enhances their sense of belonging, gives employees direction and purpose, and strengthens relationships between them (Pumble, 2023). Poor communication results in a weakened company culture, decreased employee productivity, and a higher employee turnover. (Push, 2021) Our textbook states that “Individuals are the ones who determine the organizational ethics” (Dias, 2012, p 120-121), which means that for the United States government to begin to create inclusive policies, there must first be a public demand for change from the neurodivergent population and their allies.

Rebuttal:

It is crucial to consider the potential challenges and reservations associated with promoting neurodiversity in the workplace. While the argument underscores the importance of embracing neurodivergent individuals, it is worth noting that businesses, especially in today's competitive world, often prioritize efficiency, productivity, and cost-effectiveness. Critics may argue that accommodating the unique needs of neurodivergent employees could entail substantial investments in resources and training, potentially slowing down overall operations and impacting the bottom line. They might contend that while inclusivity is vital, it

should also be balanced with the pragmatic demands of a profit-driven world.

The study “Bottom-Up Workplace Law Enforcement: An Empirical Analysis” analyzed data on worker claims and retaliation in a landmark survey taken from 4,387 low-wage workers in three of the largest U.S. cities. (Alexander and Prasad, 2013) A major issue in a bottom-up style workplace is that many employment and labor laws rely on the workers themselves to enforce their rights, and because of this, they can fail to protect the rights of the most vulnerable, who lack information and access to it. Having knowledge is a prerequisite for the enforcement of rights, similar to what we see in our nation today. Affirmative action attempts to equalize unfairness due to society's stratification, which affords less social mobility and opportunities to people who are judged on their innate abilities, such as communication. Our modern world was created by a succession of meritocratic revolutions against aristocratic societies, where we first replaced the inherited land elite with people who are more deserving of their positions, and then this was broadened by giving rights to women, minorities, and the working class, but each successive movement for the gain of human and civil rights is historically pushed by a knowledge of a need for them or a sudden awareness of a lack of rights. The reason for that is that we live in a society with an imposed hierarchical system of governing itself, or a top-down system, where the needs of the many are seen as being less important than the needs of the few, who Karl Marx referred to as the ruling class. They exploit the working class and their lack of knowledge and abilities to protect themselves, and it is because of this capitalist system that a bottom-up workplace will become exploitative. In order for our paper to work effectively, and based on the findings in the “Bottom-Up Workplace Law Enforcement: An Empirical Analysis” paper, for a bottom-up workplace to protect its most vulnerable populations, a Reverse Dominance Hierarchy must be applied to any mandated bottom-up approach. Reverse Dominance Hierarchy (RDH) refers to a social structure in which a group, through collective action, prevents any single individual or small coalition from gaining too much power or dominating others. In an RDH, the rank-and-file members actively work to maintain a relatively egalitarian distribution of power, often by enforcing norms against bullying, self-aggrandizement, or the accumulation of resources by a few. This ensures that

no individual can coerce or exploit others, as the group as a whole holds the ultimate authority and can collectively sanction or depose those who attempt to establish dominance. Reverse Dominance Hierarchy ensures that coercive leadership won't develop through a process of empowering individuals autonomously, and will counteract an imposed hierarchical system of exploitation. Page 30 of Charlotte Alexander and Arthi Prasad's paper "Bottom-Up Workplace Law Enforcement: An Empirical Analysis" states that "a bottom-up workplace enforcement regime may fail to protect the very workers who most need protection because workers making disputes often lack the legal knowledge and incentives needed for bottom-up workplace enforcement to work effectively." (27) Therefore, in order to resolve this issue and for our paper to stand a rebuttal, legal knowledge must be distributed evenly amongst all workers in order to make bottom-up communication an effective and adoptable policy.

Furthermore, skeptics may express concerns about the unfortunate potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding in a mixed workforce. The argument posits that recognizing and addressing the distinct communication styles between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals is essential. However, critics might argue that bridging this gap can be challenging, as it requires time, effort, and resources for training, coaching, and providing specialized accommodations. They may also point out that in a fast-paced business environment, where quick decision-making is crucial, the adjustments required to accommodate neurodivergent employees might not always be feasible. In addition, some may contend that placing the sole responsibility on employers to foster inclusivity might not be entirely fair. Instead, they argue that neurodivergent individuals should also adapt to the existing corporate culture and communication norms, as part of the give-and-take nature of the workplace.

While these counterarguments highlight valid concerns, it's essential to strike a balance and consider the long-term benefits of neurodiversity in the workplace. Studies have shown that embracing neurodiversity can lead to enhanced creativity, innovation, and overall productivity, making it a valuable asset for businesses. Additionally, fostering a culture of inclusivity not only benefits the neurodivergent workforce but can also lead to improved morale, loyalty, and employee retention, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more profitable work environment. A

further rebuttal to the argument might be that in asking neurotypicals/colonizers to adopt new practices for neurodivergents, it may cause civil unrest or job dissatisfaction in neurotypicals. Thus, the key is finding practical solutions to address these concerns and promote understanding among all employees to create a more equitable and productive workplace for everyone.

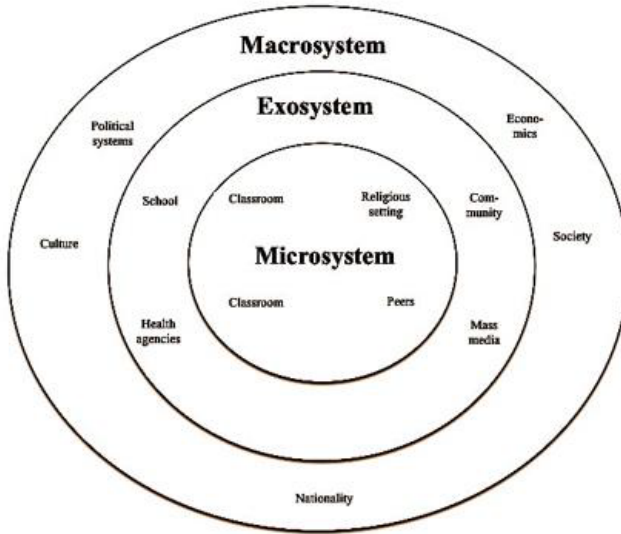
Conclusion:

In conclusion, the United States government enables businesses and organizations to discriminate against the neurodiverse population by neglecting to create inclusive policies, not because it is in the nations or a company's best interest, but because it facilitates preexisting institutionalized neurotypical supremacy structured into the United States' hierarchical government system. Discrimination is a result of stereotypes and prejudice. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it illegal to discriminate against race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Because we are unable to control many of our identity characteristics that relate to our behavior and choices such as our basic neurology or our communication style, we believe that using a bottom-up style of communication would eliminate discrimination by creating a more inclusive atmosphere where everyone has a sense of belonging and feeling valued. The Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was established to monitor discrimination laws. Their vision is about cultivating respectful and inclusive workplaces with equal opportunity for all. Because it would create a more inclusive work environment, using bottom-up styles of communication is aligned with the vision of the EEOC and thus should be a protected civil right. Washington State protects the presence of sensory, mental, or physical disabilities as well as protecting the rights of veterans and the military under their Fair Employment Practices Law, and should adopt bottom-up communication as state policy. However, a barrier to an effective bottom-up workplace regime is a lack of knowledge and education about laws and regulations as well as individual rights. In order for a bottom-up style of operations to be fully equitable and inclusive, a reverse hierarchical style of management and governance must be employed, to avoid coercive leadership and worker exploitation. Affirmative action attempts to equalize unfairness due to society's stratification, which affords less social mobility and opportunities to people who are judged on their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Society is

currently structured so that equality is unattainable. It uses a hierarchical system that establishes social and physical controls over others in order to exploit resources. This is known to sociologists as dependency theory, where the more educated, skilled, and opportunistic people benefit from the exchange of other people having less education, skills, knowledge, and opportunities. For the system to work someone always has to be on the peripheral, such as the neurodivergent in the workplace. In order to achieve real equality, the state must provide equal opportunities to everyone based on individual talents regardless of their abilities, classes, or statuses. The only way to achieve that is through a reverse dominance hierarchy, which will ensure that coercive leadership does not develop. It empowers individuals autonomously and counteracts an imposed hierarchical system of exploitation. Fostering a culture of inclusivity by utilizing a bottom-up style of both managing and communicating in the workplace would lead to increased innovation and a healthier, more profitable, and productive environment.

Appendix:

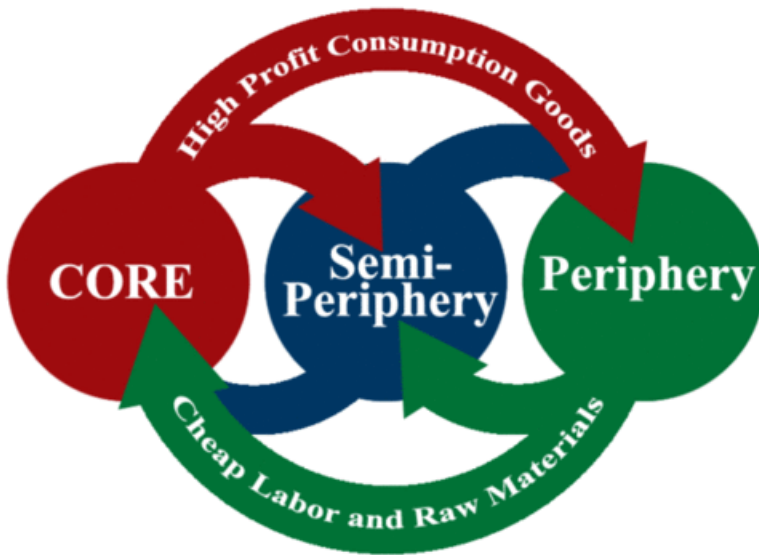
This Appendix, through the frameworks of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, and Hierarchy Theory, elucidates how the "top-down" hierarchical structures inherent in government and capitalist systems perpetuate the exploitation of neurodivergent individuals, mirroring the historical marginalization of other vulnerable groups, and conversely argues for a "bottom-up" Reverse Dominance Hierarchy to ensure genuine equity and safeguard disability rights in the workplace. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) put forth a theory that states that "family relationships relative to child development must be understood as a network of interacting parts or systems in a whole that is itself influenced by wider social and cultural processes. In short, there is not just an 'environment', but rather a multiplicity of environmental systems that an individual interacts with during development." (Lancaster, 2019) In the figure below, three of the original systems are depicted. The family layer is represented by the microsystem layer, the community layer the exosystem layer, and public policy is the macrosystem layer. Related topics of inquiry include systems psychology and ecological psychology.



Organizations are open systems in active engagement with their environments. Systems theory proposes that complex systems share some basic organizing principles. Social, theological, and cultural systems are considered to be abstract systems because they are conceptual and created in the human mind. “Systems theory provides a simple way to model organizations by focusing on the structure and relationships or interdependence among parts of the organization. A systems approach conveys the idea that organizations are made up of parts and that the parts interact with each other to accomplish the organization's goals.” (Hodge, Anthony and Gales, 2003)

Created by Immanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s, World Systems Theory is a dependency theory approach that views the entire world as a single socioeconomic system that is composed of core, periphery, and semi-periphery regions. It explains the development of the capitalistic economy, a system characterized by private ownership, in which the free market controls the production of goods and services. This theory contends that there are unequal relationships between countries with larger industrialized nations that dominate the world's ecosystem. WST states that in order for a capitalist system to exist, someone always has to exist on the periphery being exploited, such as lower income nations on the macrosystem level, or on a microsystem level the neurodivergent

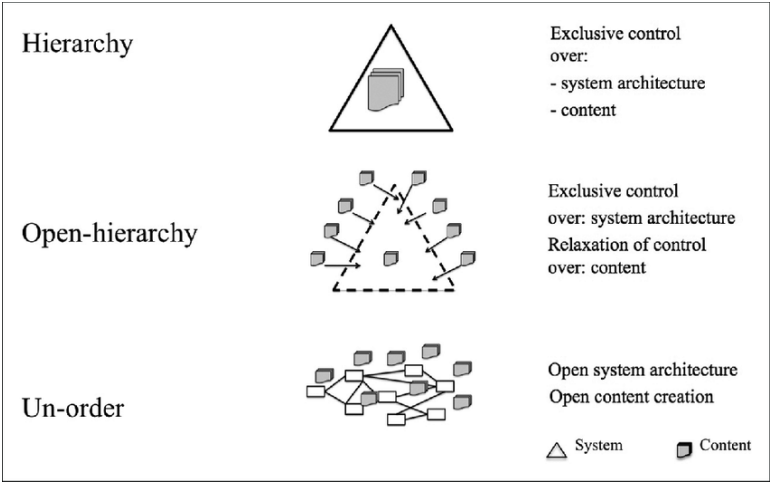
individuals within a workplace. This essay attempts to connect Neurotypical “top down” styles of communication and management with capitalism and the world stage by analyzing the treatment of neurodiverse individuals in the workplace using the previously established works of both Bronfenbrenner and Wallerstein.



Wallerstein's World System Theory Model

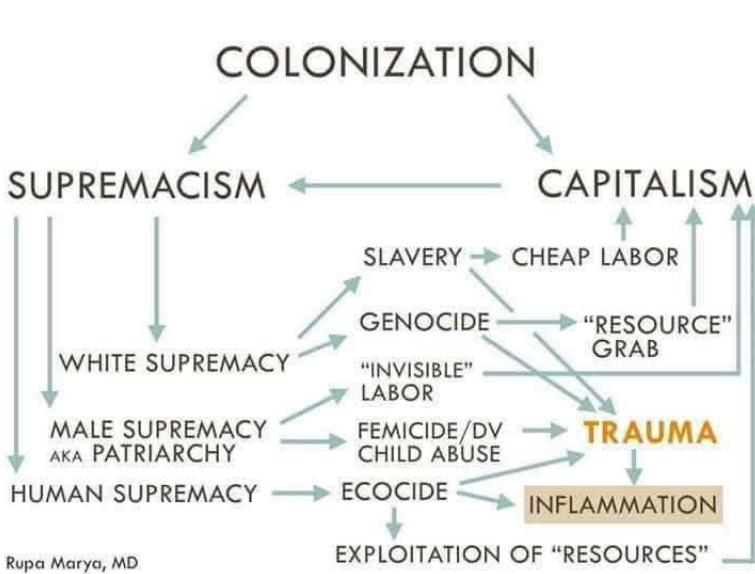
In the figure above (Medium, 2016), “Core” would be represented by the words “Neurotypical” and “Top Down” used in this paper, and the “Periphery” represents the “Neurodivergent” “Neurodiverse” and “Bottom up” concepts addressed within this document. Hierarchy theory is an offshoot of general systems theory. In the paper Hierarchy Theory: An Overview it contends that “In both the natural and the artificial worlds, complex systems are often hierarchically organized” (Wu, 2013). The United States federal government is an example of a top down hierarchy that employs exclusive controls over its system architecture and the content found within its systems. This paper posits a theory that replacing a top down hierarchy with open systems architecture and open

systems content creation would end worker exploitation. Abusive systems based on dependency and unequal power dynamics could be substituted with a reverse dominance hierarchy, as seen in the figure below. (Sawhney and Suri, 2013)



The article “Bottom-Up Workplace Law Enforcement: An Empirical Analysis” analyzed data on worker claims and retaliation in a landmark survey taken from 4,387 low-wage workers in three of the largest U.S. cities. A major issue cited in this paper for a bottom-up style workplace is that many employment and labor laws rely on the workers themselves to enforce their rights, and because of this, it can fail to protect the rights of the most vulnerable, who lack information and access to it. EEOC Claims from the fiscal years between 1997 and 2019 found that 21% of all discrimination claims filed with the EEOC were due to employers taking unlawful action against their employees, representing one of the largest percentages for reasons why claims are filed. Having knowledge is a prerequisite for enforcement of and defense of worker rights. Affirmative action attempts to equalize unfairness in the workplace due to societies stratification, which affords less social mobility and opportunities to people who are judged on their innate abilities, such as communication abilities as set forth in this paper. This modern world was created by a succession of meritocratic revolutions against aristocratic societies, first

replacing the inherited land elite with people who are more deserving of their positions. Then this was broadened by giving rights to women, minorities, and the working class, but each successive movement for the gain of human and civil rights is historically pushed by a knowledge of a need for them or a sudden awareness of a lack of rights. The reason for that is due to a society with an imposed hierarchical system of governing itself, or a top-down system, where the needs of the many are seen as being less important than the needs of the few. Karl Marx referred to the few as the “ruling class” or “bourgeoisie,” a small class of people who exploit the working class and their lack of knowledge. It is because of this system of exploitation that a bottom-up workplace will not work. Based on the findings in the “Bottom-Up Workplace Law Enforcement: An Empirical Analysis” paper, in order for a bottom-up workplace to protect its most vulnerable populations, a Reverse Dominance Hierarchy or “Open System” must be applied to any mandated bottom-up approach. Reverse Dominance Hierarchy ensures that coercive leadership won’t develop, through a process of empowering individuals autonomously that will counteract the imposed hierarchical system of exploitation.



Planet Babel: How Linguistics Colonized the Western Mind, and How Autism is Calling for a Return to Relational Coherence

This essay explores how colonial and imperial linguistic transformations severed humanity from its ancestral relational coherence, giving rise to the illusion of an isolated, ego-bound self. Beginning with the myth of the Tower of Babel and grounded in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the analysis traces how shifts in grammar and pronoun structure from relational to individualistic fractured not only communication but consciousness itself. As language evolved to prioritize the discrete “I,” cultures moved away from matriarchal and collective ontologies toward fractured identities shaped by patriarchy, hierarchy, dominance, and alienation. Drawing from Carl Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious and Indigenous linguistic traditions such as Tamil, Anishinaabemowin, and Nahuatl, this paper demonstrates how language shapes not just thought, but being. The final section introduces neurodivergent identity, especially autism, as a form of evolutionary resistance to this ontological rupture. Rather than viewing autism as a pathology, the paper positions it as a remnant of ancestral coherence and an embodied refusal to conform to systems rooted in separateness and control. Through decolonial theory, linguistic anthropology, and neurodiversity studies, this paper argues that healing our fractured psyches requires deconstructing the colonized grammar of the self and returning to a language of relationship, reciprocity, and collective presence. The argument that autism reflects a retained, ancestral form of relational consciousness disrupted by linguistic colonization is radically original and potentially paradigm-shifting.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the Book of Genesis describes humanity’s attempt to build a tower reaching to heaven, unified by a single language. God, threatened by their power, scatters the people across the Earth and confuses them by separating them linguistically. Due to the language barriers and what Sapir-Whorf described as the structure of a language determining a native speaker’s cognitive process, perception

and categorization of experience, the inhabitants of planet Earth have thus been unable to understand each other ever since. Many Biblical scholars believe this story explores the themes of humanity's pride, ambition, and the nature of God's power and dominance over humankind. What if this is more than just a story, and it reflects hidden historical truths obscured by time? This essay's interpretation of Babel as historical memory of colonial-linguistic trauma is a mythopoetic hypothesis, not a literal archaeological claim.

Earlier Biblical Hebrew, which the Old Testament was originally written in, and the later Modern Hebrew exhibit significant grammatical differences. Biblical Hebrew is characterized by a more complex syntax with a flexible and mixed word order with Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) being common, along with a richer system of case endings and verb conjugations. Modern Hebrew on the other hand shows a trend towards simplification, with more consistent Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order similar to English, and the use of prepositions to express relationships previously indicated by morphology. This shows a language evolving towards a philosophical and spiritual shift moving away from interdependence and towards separateness. Earlier Hebrew encoded relationality within the words themselves, and later Hebrew reflected a move towards discrete identity where words were more distinct, and a more individualized and delineated framework arose. "I am because we are" became "I am I, and you are you".

The early Israelites lived in close connection with the natural world, which heavily influenced their worldview and language. Some scholars argue that the Bible itself contains hints and textual evidence supporting matrilineal descent, particularly in passages dealing with intermarriage. They suggest that the emphasis on matrilineal descent in later texts is a continuation of this earlier practice, not a later development. As Hebrew grammar moved from synthetic to analytic, it paralleled a cultural move from embedded relational consciousness towards individualist perception, and this same illusion of separateness mirrored the cultural shift from a nature based and relational matrilineal society to the capitalist and patriarchal one that Jesus eventually rebelled against. One example often cited is how biblical genealogies sometimes emphasize the mother's lineage rather than the father's, which is unusual in patrilineal societies. For instance, in Genesis 17:16, God tells Abraham that Sarah will be "the

mother of nations,” and kings will come from her. Here, Sarah is not just a vessel for Abraham’s line but a progenitor in her own right. Likewise, in Ruth 4:11–17, the community blesses Ruth and explicitly ties her childbearing to the continuation of Israel, and the genealogy leading to David highlights her role. Scholars point out that Ruth’s inclusion suggests descent and legitimacy can be recognized through maternal lines. Similarly, the prominence of figures like Mary in the New Testament, whose lineage establishes Jesus’ legitimacy, shows the mother as central to spiritual inheritance. These instances provide hints that matrilineal descent and identity were acknowledged, even if not institutionalized, within the biblical text.

This grammatical difference is a primary reason why the Bible’s lessons have been lost in translation and is what also has allowed the Biblical teachings to turn into a weapon and tool of imperialist control as opposed to the path to liberation it was originally intended to be. Many of the conflicts and relational issues such as “I matter, you don’t” or “you matter, I don’t” and the resultant cognitive and behavioral narcissism/codependency which can be seen in the world today can be traced to similar linguistic and cultural shifts. English in particular is one of the most egocentric languages. In contrast, most indigenous languages center “us” and “we” and are relational dialectics as opposed to individual. This shift in language leans more towards imperialist control, and the interpretation of it by the Christian church further emphasizes the us/them dynamic as an institutional form of social control. Fluid collective understanding is embedded into the words being spoken, and this cognition and relational understanding is then reflected by the culture and the ways those peoples relate to one another and the world around them as an interdependent and single unified being.

Some Indian scholars believe that before all languages there was a single language spoken by all peoples, “Bhasha” (which translates to language), and as other dialects were added, it became known as Sam-skritham, which then became Sanskrit following the Aryan migration. Arya means advanced, of high rank, or noble. Sanskrit means perfected, refined, or purified. These are indications of Aryan colonization of the local Dravidian peoples. Their migration into the area created the current Indian culture as Indo Aryans adapted and incorporated elements of earlier Dravidian traditions and beliefs into their own. Sanskrit reflects

dualistic thought and contains a separate “I” or reference to self apart from the rest of existence in its grammatical structure, and it is considered a “designed” language, similar to computer programming languages. This binary linguistic adaptation profoundly shaped the way that people related to each other and to the world around them. Sanskrit and Pali languages were a linguistic system of codified control used by the imperialist and colonial Aryans, and reflect the individualist, hierarchical and patriarchal values of an empirical caste society. Magadhi Prakrit, the language used by Buddha, shares similarities with Pali, which evolved from earlier forms of Indo-Aryan and is primarily known as the language of the Theravada Buddhist canon, while Sanskrit became the language of Hinduism and broader Indian culture.

A brief study on the history of that area reveals that predating the Proto-Indo-European and Indo-Aryan languages, local Dravidian inhabitants spoke a dialect called Tamil, which is said to be the mother of all Dravidian languages and is estimated to be about 5000 years old. It has somehow resisted extinction and it is still spoken to this day by a number of people. Tamil is a precolonial non-dualistic language and refers to an understanding of time being cyclic and relational, not linear. The very language deeply encodes relationality, land based consciousness, and ancestral continuity. Tamil is known grammatically for its flexible word order due to its highly inflected nature. This allows for pragmatic variations where the order can be shifted for emphasis or stylistic reasons. Use of honorifics and kinship-based pronouns reflect who one is in relationship to others; no separate concept of “I” is expressed, and individuals are often referred to by role as opposed to name. Body, spirit, plants, and cosmos are linguistically integrated into a single continuum. These ideas are reflective of the interdependent, matrilineal, relational and land rooted culture shared by Tamil speaking peoples.

“அம்மா சாப்பாடு வைத்தார்” (Amma sāppādu vaittār).

Literal translation: “Mother placed the food.”

Relational meaning: Instead of emphasizing “I am eating” or naming an individual, the sentence situates identity through kinship (“mother”) and action, encoding relationality rather than an isolated “I.”

Another variation: “அண்ணன் வந்தார்” (Aṇṇan vandār).

Literal translation: “Elder brother came.”

Relational meaning: The subject is defined by role (“elder brother”), not by personal name, reflecting identity as relationally grounded within kinship structures.

Traced through colonization to its indigenous roots, the Tower of Babel instead of just a story or parable becomes a living historical account of global conquest and the colonial and empirical domination of the planet’s First Peoples. According to a small percentage of the linguistic world, Proto-Indo-European (PIE) and Proto-Uralic languages are related. Japanese linguist Kanehira Joji (2018) believes that the Japanese language is related to the Uralic languages, and according to him, early Japanese was influenced by Chinese, Austonesian and Ainu. The Uralic hypothesis is one of several proposed theories attempting to connect Japanese with other language families, alongside possibilities like the Sino-Tibetan languages (Īno Mutsumi) or the Dravidian languages. Other linguists note a similarity between Japanese and Korean. The closer one looks, the more similarities and connections can be drawn between all world languages.

Tocharian A and B are considered the parent languages of all PIE languages; Tocharian A was discovered from Buddhist texts dating back to around the 7th century AD. It coexisted with a related language, Tocharian B that, possibly together with Krorānian, formed the Tocharian branch of the Indo-European languages. This language was notably used in what China’s Han dynasty then called the Kiu-che Kingdom (known as the Kushan Empire). Evidence suggests that Tocharian society, which encompassed both Tocharian A and B speakers in the Tarim Basin, has a strong patriarchal social component which came to replace the matriarchal and relational indigenous cultures previously living in that area.

Other indigenous and ancestral languages aside from Tamil and Early Hebrew also reflect relational ontologies where identity is not individualistic, but interdependent and collective. While most distinguish entities in some way, they de-emphasize and in some cases entirely lack the concept of a separate “I” self-such as found in English. Linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1997) has written about languages that do not privilege the

individualistic “I” of English, especially in Indigenous, Asian, and African contexts, and notes that English is one of the most egocentric languages globally. In North America, Ojibwe/Anishinaabemowin holds a relational worldview, where everything is understood in relation to everything else including people, animals, spirits, and the land. It lacks an egocentric “I” in the way English uses it, and the speaker often places themselves last in phrasing (e.g., “you and I”). Ojibwe/Anishinaabemowin is verb-based and animacy-based rather than subject-based, and prioritizes relationships over individual actions. In Alaska, the Koyukon Athabaskan have an ecosophical language where names and verbs encode relationships to landscape, animal kin, seasons. The idea of the “self” is diffuse, woven into relationships with ancestors, animals, and ecology.

A simple example comes from how Ojibwe speakers phrase something like “You and I will go.” In English, the “I” is centered: “I and you will go” (though we often smooth it to “you and I”). The structure assumes subjects are primary. In Ojibwe/Anishinaabemowin, a common phrasing is “Giin ninawind izhaadaa” → “You and I will go.” Giin = you; ninawind = we (inclusive, you + I); izhaadaa = let’s go. Here, the verb carries the action and the relationship, and the order places you before I. The focus is not on the individual subject but on the shared action and relationship.

Another example: “Nindoodem nindizhinikaaz” → “My clan is what I am called.” The self is described through clan identity (a relational category tied to animals, land, and ancestry), rather than through an isolated egoic “I.” These examples show how Ojibwe grammar encodes a relational worldview: verbs and relationships shape meaning, not stand-alone subjects.

Hawaiian/‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i language uses inclusive and exclusive “we” (kākou vs. mākou) instead of “I”-centered speech and focuses on collective identity and ancestral connection. The self is seen as part of an ongoing lineage and relationship with land (‘āina). In Lakota/Dakota/Nakota (Siouan languages), self-identity is interpersonal and spoken identity is situated within family, tribal, and spiritual relations. They emphasize kinship terms and collective phrases far more than an isolated “I.” In Mexico, Nahuatl includes concepts like nepantla (being in-between)

and *teotl* (sacred energy), which reflect interconnected being. Identity is not fixed, but relational and cosmic, where one "is" only in relation to others and the divine. The Tewa (Puebloan language, New Mexico) use a grammar and cosmology that are inherently communal. Personhood emerges through ceremony, kinship, and reciprocity, and the concept of "I" is not central or emphasized. For the Ainu (Indigenous Japan), the world is filled with spirits (*kamuy*), and humans are not separate from the natural world. Subject-object divisions are minimized in the structure of the language.

The Yolngu Matha (Australia, Arnhem Land) use a complex kinship-based pronoun system where identity is understood through clan, land, songlines, and ancestry. "Self" cannot be expressed without reference to one's kin and land. And for the (African) Xhosa and other Bantu languages, use of an inclusive vs. exclusive "we" is employed. The culture emphasizes the concept of Ubuntu, or "I am because we are" where the self is socially constructed and embedded within the community. Polynesian languages (Samoan, Māori, Tongan, etc.) include dual and plural pronouns that center relationships over the ego. They focus on genealogy (*whakapapa*, in Māori), collective history, and responsibility to ancestors.

In these given examples above such as Tamil, Nahuatl, Anishinaabemowin and many other ancestral languages, the self was never separate from the whole. There was no "I", only we and a self in relation or context. This interconnectedness is what the Buddha taught with the meditation of a simple offering of a flower to his disciple. Early Biblical Hebrew also bears strong signs of relational ontology much like these indigenous examples. Pronouns were embedded, not emphasized; the subject (like "I") is often implied in the verb itself rather than explicitly stated. There is no separate "I", it arises only in context and relationship. For example, in Exodus 3:14, "I Am That I Am" (HarperCollins, 2004) contains "I" within the verb "to be" and not as a separate entity. Because Biblical Hebrew was verb-based, there was a fluid sense of identity which defined individuals in terms of context and with a dynamic self-concept rather than linear or fixed. This relational ontology was reflected in original Hebrew theology where the concepts of sin, justice and identity were relational and not personal.

A clear example is found in the Hebrew phrase אֲנֹכִי דֹבֵר (anokhi do-ver) versus simply דֹבֵר אֲנֹכִי (dover anokhi), both meaning “I speak.”

- In Biblical Hebrew, the verb דֹבֵר (dover) already implies the subject “I” within its form.
- The pronoun אֲנֹכִי (anokhi, “I”) is not required but sometimes added for emphasis.
- Thus, the “I” is not a stand-alone egoic subject but an embedded relational marker within the action.

This is similar to Exodus 3:14, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh), often translated as “I Am That I Am.” The verb אֶהְיֶה (ehyeh) literally means “I will be” or “I am being,” where the “I” is inseparable from the verb itself. The subject is revealed only through the act of being, not as an independent entity.

The separate and egoically entrenched “I” only gained prominence under pressure of empire, exile and colonizing language. Early Hebrew was influenced by the colonial invading empire and its competing linguistic and philosophical systems. Under Persian and Hellenistic influence, individual responsibility became more emphasized with morality becoming internalized rather than shared. During Rabbinic Judaism in the Roman era, legalism replaced collective responsibility, with Aramaic and Greek influencing thoughts, perceptions and worldviews. Legalism, in this context, refers to a strict adherence to laws and regulations, often emphasizing external observance over internal conviction or the spirit of the law. It shifts focus from shared communal obligations to individual compliance with a codified set of rules, often leading to a more rigid and less flexible interpretation of religious or social practices. Relation, kinship and interdependence were replaced, developing the human ego from a flexible node in a collective web to an isolated and divided illusory separate sense of self. And just as the Buddha’s teaching of no-self was later reframed through the lens of state control, the relational root of Hebrew was gradually overwritten by systems that relied on control through separation linguistically, spiritually, and legally.

With this context and when viewed through this relational non-dual lens that lacks a separate self, Western psychology and psychiatry as well as the cultural and institutional pathologization of mental health in

America and elsewhere can also be understood as a tool of the colonial empire, and as a systematic attempt to divide and control a relational species into individual and controllable units. In opposition to this, one of the foundational philosophical insights of Pragmatism is that reality only exists in relationship, where nothing that is absolutely independent can be said to be real. For instance, while one can count the cells in their body and perceive them as separate and distinct, even their “distinct” membranes exist only in relation to each other and the body itself, exchanging nutrients, information and energy with the whole. Their very function and identities are contextual and interdependent.

Carl Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious suggests that beneath individual awareness lies a shared reservoir of ancestral memory, symbolism, and emotional truths, or what Indigenous traditions have long known as ancestral knowing or dreamtime. This layer of psyche is relational by nature, not separate, and encodes our deepest connections to land, kin, spirit, and cosmos. Similarly, collective consciousness refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral frameworks that bind a society. When language shifts from relational forms (like those found in Tamil, Hebrew, or Anishinaabemowin) to individualized, ego-centric grammar (as in modern English, Chinese or Sanskrit), it does more than change communication, it severs access to the collective psyche. The illusion of the “I” isolates individuals from this shared unconscious inheritance, replacing mutual knowing with personal identity, hierarchy, and alienation. Over time, this linguistic and cultural severance fragments the collective field itself, making it harder for communities to attune to shared truth, empathy, or spiritual continuity. Language, therefore, is not merely a vessel for thought, it is the architecture of consciousness itself. And as our grammar becomes more individuated, so too does our disconnection from the ancestral and collective mind widen and deepen.

The Maori word for autism is "takiwātanga". It is derived from the phrase "tōku/tōna anō takiwā", which translates to "my/his/her own time and space". This term reflects the understanding that individuals with autism may experience the world differently, and one way that autistics do this is through retaining their instinctual awareness of the relational self. Populations stigmatized by Western individual pathology such as autistic and other neurodivergencies have retained this ancestral relational knowledge, which is the primary reason why those groups struggle

to function in capitalist and colonial systems reliant upon individualism and separatism. By divorcing context from content, Western psychology is essentially gaslighting entire populations for their emotional and behavioral difficulties which are reflective of the dysfunctional system (individualism) that causes them to arise. Where Western psychiatric frameworks define conditions such as depression or anxiety as discrete, biomedical illnesses, anthropological perspectives recognize cultural, social, and existential dimensions of distress and unwellness. This paper redefines neurodivergency as a resistance to this egoic false self or "I" which colonization and linguistics have imposed upon our collective cognition.

The publication titled "The Autistic Neo-Neanderthal Tribe and the Harappan Asuric..." (Kurup and Kurup, 2017) mentions a hypothesis relating increased autism prevalence in the Dravidian Nair community to Neanderthal features and metabolomics. Dr. Emily Casanova, a neuroscientist and assistant professor at Loyola University New Orleans, has conducted research exploring the evolutionary origins of autism susceptibility genes. While she has not explicitly categorized autism into a distinct evolutionary group, her work suggests that autism-related genes are ancient and highly conserved across species. For example, in her 2019 study, she found that autism risk genes are evolutionarily ancient and maintain a unique feature landscape that echoes their function. This means that autism risk genes are not only very old in evolutionary terms, but they also carry distinctive biological "signatures" that have been preserved over time because they serve important functions. In her 2019 study, Dr. Casanova showed that these genes often regulate fundamental processes like brain development, cell communication, and synaptic function. Their "unique feature landscape" refers to the fact that the way these genes are structured and how they operate sets them apart from other types of genes. In other words, the same qualities that make them essential for complex brain function also make them more vulnerable to variation, which can contribute to autism when small changes occur. There are several other researchers who have explored evolutionary perspectives on autism, including the idea that autism may represent distinct evolutionary adaptations or groups within human neurodiversity. Some notable figures and their contributions include Simon Baron-Cohen, who explores autism as a spectrum of social cognition differences with

potential evolutionary roots related to systemizing abilities; Christopher Gillburg, who has contributed to understanding the heritability and complex gene-environment interactions in autism; Edward H. Hagen, noted for evolutionary theories of depression but also interested in neurodivergence broadly, who explores how certain psychological traits, including those on the autism spectrum, may be adaptive in evolutionary contexts; Michael Fitzgerald, a clinical psychiatrist who has written about autism from an evolutionary and developmental perspective, posited that autism represents a neurodevelopmental variation that has persisted due to certain adaptive advantages.

Applying Edward Hagen's evolutionary model of mental illness as a response to adversity (Hagen, 2011), along with Brown's assertion that self-destructive behaviors function as cultural mechanisms (Brown, 1986), we can clearly see that autism serves as a relational regulatory counterbalance within individualistic societal structures. Autism and other mental health issues emerge as an adaptive response to a lack of collectivist and relational cognition and cultural complexity, and an evolutionary attempt to ensure both social stability and achieve group cohesion.

The very traits that make autistic individuals struggle in such a controlling and hyper-individualistic system such as honesty, moral clarity, and sensitivity to inconsistency are not dysfunctions but reminders of our lost relationality and indicators of a broken social fabric. If society replaced the linguistic and cognitive "I" and individual self with indigenous collectivism, many of the challenges that autistic individuals currently face would not be framed as disabilities, but as essential contributions to a healthier, more connected world. In environments where emotional repression, performative socialization, and hierarchical dominance are the norm, autistic individuals who often prioritize authenticity, direct communication, and logic over social conformity struggle to navigate a system that values compliance over connection. Many autistic traits, such as difficulty with small talk, discomfort with social masking, and a preference for deep, meaningful relationships, stand in stark contrast to an individualistic culture that rewards superficial charm, manipulative social strategies, and emotional suppression. In this way, autism serves as both a mirror and a critique of an imperialistic society that has colonized human minds through language with the illusory sense of a

separate self and which fails to teach emotional literacy, relies on transactional relationships, and punishes those who do not conform to arbitrary social norms.

To decolonize one's self is to lose the illusion of having a separate self and to instead learn to identify as being in relation to all of creation. To decolonize the self is to unlearn the colonial illusion of separateness and reorient identity toward relationship with all of creation. This begins by questioning inherited narratives that frame the self as isolated, and instead re-storying identity through belonging, kinship, and interdependence. It involves embodied practices, such as tending the land, breathing with awareness, or honoring natural elements as relatives, that retrain the nervous system to feel safety in connection. Language is also central, as many Indigenous and ancestral languages encode relational being by embedding pronouns and dissolving the ego-centered "I." Decolonization requires relational healing and accountability, where empathy and repair take precedence over domination or withdrawal. Finally, spiritual and communal practices that honor ancestors, spirits, and more-than-human kin anchor this shift, reminding us that selfhood is never solitary but always entangled. In this sense, decolonizing the self is not a final achievement but an ongoing practice of remembering and living into relational being.

The myth of Babel is not merely an ancient allegory, but a living memory of a deep rupture in the human experience where language was weaponized, relationality fractured, and the illusion of a separate self was seeded through empire, patriarchy, and linguistic conquest. From early Hebrew to Tamil, Nahuatl to Anishinaabemowin, ancestral languages encoded interconnectedness, fluid identity, and collective responsibility. These linguistic frameworks reflected and sustained cultures rooted in reciprocity, ecology, and reverence. The rise of analytic, ego-centered languages like English, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Pali paralleled cultural shifts toward hierarchy, domination, and control, which highlights systems that pathologized neurodivergence, commodified the self, and erased indigenous relational knowledge. Autism and other so-called disorders are not actual flaws within individuals, but indicators of a society structured against its own relational nature. What we label as "mental illness" may, in truth, be the psyche's resistance to a false self and relational fragmentation, a cry for wholeness in a culture that no longer

speaks the language of “we.” To heal, both individually and collectively, we must remember our Oneness and unite. In pursuit of holistic and proactive mental health frameworks, we must decolonize our tongues, and by doing so we will re-root our consciousness in an ancestral grammar that restoratively reclaims the wisdom that the “self” is not isolated, but an interdependent unit in relationship with all creation.

Colonial Encounters on Film

The legacy of colonialism is not only written in blood and land but in the images, narratives, and ethnographies that sought to capture Indigenous peoples at the moment of contact. A comparative analysis of several documentary films: *First Contact* (1983), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), *The Hadza* (1965), *Dead Birds* (1963), and the series of *Yanomamö* films (1970–1974) reveals how Indigenous relational systems and spiritual ontologies were systematically disrupted, reinterpreted, and suppressed under colonial expansion. These films provide a record of both Indigenous resilience and colonial imposition, showing how colonization operates not only at the material level but also at the psychological, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of all human life.

First Contact: “They are not of the living”

In *First Contact* (Connolly & Anderson, 1983), the Leahy brothers’ 1930s expedition into the New Guinea Highlands records the stunned reaction of Indigenous groups encountering Europeans for the first time. Around eleven minutes into the film, the Ganiga people describe the white colonial explorers as “they are not of the living,” interpreting the pale skin of the colonizers as evidence that they were the dead ancestors of the tribe. Photographs from this first meeting show the shock etched on the villagers’ faces, their eyes wide with fear as they beheld what they took to be inhuman figures. The colonial Europeans violently killed members of the tribe, and coercively had sex with the indigenous women, many of them young girls at the time of first contact. This encounter illustrates how colonial contact immediately destabilized Indigenous cosmologies, imposing existential disorientation alongside physical intrusion.

Rabbit-Proof Fence: The Breeding Out of a Race

In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002), set in Western Australia in 1931, the colonial goal of assimilation was made explicit: the “breeding out” of Indigenous racial characteristics. As officials stated, “in spite of himself, the native must be helped” and “the bush natives have to be protected against themselves. If they would only understand what we are

trying to do for them.” Under the Aboriginal Act, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families until as late as 1970 in an attempt to avoid the “creation of an unwanted third race.” The violence of this policy illustrates how colonialism aimed not only at land seizure but at genetic and cultural erasure, breaking relational kinship structures that sustained Indigenous societies.

The Hadza: Familiarity and Disruption

In *The Hadza* (Johnson & Johnson, 1965), the hunter-gatherer people of Tanzania are depicted as comfortable being filmed and studied, in contrast with the fear and awe visible in *First Contact*. Their way of life revolved around a rhythm of balance: two hours a day spent hunting and gathering, fresh food prepared and eaten daily, evenings of song and dance, and the rest of the time spent with family and friends creating, preparing meals, and feasting. Yet in 1965, soon after the film was made, the Hadza were forcibly relocated into settlements: “where it is planned, they will learn to live by peasant farming.” Here the disruption is not immediate terror but gradual assimilation, as a relational and cyclical way of life was displaced by the imposed linear productivity of agriculture.

Dead Birds: People as Specimens

Dead Birds (Gardner, 1963), documenting the Harvard-Peabody expedition to the Dani people of West New Guinea, exposes the ethnocentric gaze of anthropology in the mid-twentieth century. The film is narrated with the detached tone of a National Geographic program, as if the people were animals without autonomous feelings or consciousness, objects to be studied. Cultural relativism is present, but tinged with superiority: the Dani are described as though their practices are alien rather than human. The Dani concept of *atayakin*, or soul seeds, reveals a deep relational ontology as “the purpose of magic is to keep ghosts away.” Yet the film frames this not as a legitimate cosmology but as a curious cultural artifact. Here, anthropology itself becomes complicit in the colonial project, re-presenting Indigenous life as primitive spectacle for Western consumption.

The Yanomamö Films: From Naked Bodies to Colonized Towns

The series of Yanomamö films, *The Feast* (1970), *Magical Death* (1973), and *Ocamo Is My Town* (1974), provides a stark chronicle of colonization in progress. In the first, the Yanomamö are shown naked, dancing in ritual life. By the last, they appear fully clothed in colonizer attire, attending church and speaking Spanish in schools.

In *Ocamo Is My Town*, a priest comments: “I’ve never seen a person who uses drugs do anything worse than those who don’t.” He acknowledges that destroying hallucinogenic plants would destroy their culture, noting that “70% of the things their spiritual remedies are meant to cure are of NERVOUS origin.” This has potential implications regarding what we might frame as substance abuse “disorder” in our modern world.

He also asserts, “Indians have practically nothing.” This raises the question: is it deprivation, or simply a different valuation system, that defines their happiness? “How can we help these people incorporate themselves into the nation?” the film asks, even as it shows schools indoctrinating Indigenous children into the mythologies of the nation-state and its so-called liberators. Ostensibly, they were “given rights by the state,” but the deeper rights to land, culture, and identity were left unrecognized. Dependence on the introduction of new technologies from colonizers altered diets and culture, with fishing nets and hooks shifting subsistence patterns toward a heavy reliance on fish and colonial cattle.

The film *New Tribes Mission* makes explicit the spiritual aim of colonization: “bring the message of salvation through Jesus Christ to these people, who otherwise would not have the opportunity to know Christ died for their sins,” “the main objective is spiritual.” Missionaries described the Yanomamö as “turned from worshipping demons,” their “standard of living greatly risen.” The narration of missionaries reveals the strong cultural bias of Christians and their lack of respect toward the indigenous: “they worship demons, they worship evil spirits. therefore, when you teach them there is one true god, one God above all, then you have to teach them that to take your dope and contact your evil spirits, you are putting another god before the true god.”

Such statements reveal the ethnocentric erasure of Indigenous spirituality. The Yanomamö understand the spirit world as multidimensional, with four distinct realms. Their bodies are houses for multiple spirits,

including the moamo or life essence and hekura spirit allies. At death, the house collapses and souls disperse. Missionaries saw this not as a living cosmology but as a threat to be eradicated and a need to “make God ‘real’ to them.”

The most telling line in the film acknowledges Indigenous resistance: “It’s been harder with the Yanomamö because they feel they are The People, and all foreigners are just ‘freaks’ you might say.” Civilization, the film insists, is inevitable: “the more they know, they can handle civilization when it comes in.” But this raises the question: why must civilization come in at all, and at whose benefit, or is there a benefit at all?

Colonization as Genetic Experimentation

Taken together, these films reveal a disturbing through-line: colonization is not only about conquest of territory or assimilation of culture, but also about reshaping the genetic future of Indigenous peoples. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, officials openly declared that the goal was to “breed out” Indigenous characteristics, forcibly removing children under the Aboriginal Act to prevent the creation of an “unwanted third race.” This policy was explicit eugenics, carried out through generations of state-sanctioned child removal and reproductive control (Noyce, 2002).

In *First Contact*, the Indigenous reaction of seeing white men as “not of the living” was a recognition of a pale, alien presence that threatened to disrupt the continuity of indigenous life (Connolly & Anderson, 1983). The *Hadza* and *Dani* films illustrate how even when reproductive control is not explicit, colonial interventions erode the social and ecological conditions that sustain Indigenous survival. Forced settlement, farming, and reorganization of daily rhythms undermine not only culture but also epigenetic resilience, weakening immune systems and reshaping biological survival.

The Yanomamö films (*The Feast*, *Magical Death*, *Ocamo Is My Town*) document the culmination of this process: language, spirituality, diet, and reproductive practices re-engineered under colonial supervision. Missionaries framed the goal as “liberation,” but in practice, it was the systematic replacement of Indigenous cosmologies with colonial religion, Indigenous foods with imported technologies, and Indigenous reproductive autonomy with state oversight. Across these case studies,

colonization functions as a genetic and cultural breeding experiment. By controlling marriage, reproduction, child-rearing, diet, and health practices, colonizers seek to weaken our Indigenous lineages and overwrite relational ontologies with their egoic, hierarchical ones. This reveals a deeper truth: the project of colonialism has always been biopolitical and psychosocial, targeting not only lands and resources but also the very biology and historical identity of Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

Together, these films reveal the layered mechanisms of colonization: shock and terror at first contact, forced assimilation through child removal and settlement, ethnographic framing of people as specimens, material disruption through technology and agriculture, and spiritual conquest through missionary imposition. They also show colonization as an active and ongoing project of cultural assimilation that is occurring simultaneously all across the globe. Indigenous worlds are not “primitive”; they are relational, ecological, and collective systems of meaning. Colonialism, in contrast, imposes an egoic, hierarchical, and extractive worldview. What is at stake is not simply land or resources but the right to sustain a way of being in which identity is shared, spirits are multiple, and the living web of connection is still honored.

Kathlamet and Wahkiakum Tribal Research Project

This essay is included as an anthropological study of how the West became colonized and also as an ongoing example of colonization's active and ongoing project to exterminate all indigenous genetics and neurodivergence from the planet.

In March 2020, I moved to the tiny town of Cathlamet (population 578 in 2022 according to a US Census). Immediately struck by the beauty of the Columbia River and the lush green vegetation and trees alongside either shore, I imagined what life must have been like here for the indigenous complex hunter gatherer tribes that shared these lands prior to its colonization by white Euro-Americans, and how the large trader ships sailing on the wide river might have appeared to them. The Elochoman Slough Marina, located in the town of Cathlamet, provides housing and storage for recreational and commercial boaters, but at the time of Lewis and Clark it was once the site of a very large and thriving village of Wahkiakum peoples (Budd). The Wahkiakum County Courthouse has a historical marker that says, "This site, long the home and hunting ground of the Indian, was first sighted by white man in 1792 when Lt. Broughton was sent by Capt. Vancouver to verify Gray's reported discovery of the Columbia, and visited by Lewis and Clark in 1805 on their Northwest Expedition. Here the tribes of Cathlamet and Wahkiakum gathered, lived and passed on. To this frontier in 1846, impelled by beauty of river and forest, came James Birnie, formerly of Hudson's Bay Company. Here he built his home and called it Birnie's Retreat. With the coming of other settlers, he named this site Cathlamet." But how accurate is this history?

The words "gathered, lived, and passed on" used on the site marker seem intentionally vague, and leave a lot to the imagination. Does passed on mean die, or moved to a new area? Who were these tribes? Why did they pass on? And why does it use the word passed, when members of the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes are potentially still living today?

This is what Bob Peterson referred to as whitewashing, a tendency to downplay conflict and not give any context to conflicts, which detracts from our nation's rich history by presenting a homogenized version written generally in favor of the winners; in this case white people. According to an article by Lynn Pasquerella published by AACU magazine, Margaret Koch, director of The Bullock, said that "Our understanding of history changes over time as the historical record is revealed through new research and insight, but our relationship to history remains complex and often very personal" (Pasquerella). It should be noted that most academics and anthropologists studying indigenous cultures are doing so from an outside perspective, because the majority of them are white. Fair and unbiased education involves shaping an inclusive American story in ways that are accessible to all, as seen in the *Telling All American's Stories* project by the National Park Service.

The book *The Chinook Indians: Traders of the Lower Columbia River* helped to partly answer what happened to these people. The foreword from the book was written by the Reverend Stephen A. Meriwether, a Chinook tribal member who relates his story about how he learned as a child that the whitewashed version of history considered his tribe to be already extinct. After preparing a report in school about his ancestors, he was told by his teacher that his paper couldn't be true because there were no Chinooks left, they had all died. The body of information about the Chinook tribe consisted primarily of scattered scanty and inaccurate information throughout the diaries of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and from the journals of numerous sea captains, prompting a need to gather and analyze that information by the authors Robert H. Ruby, a private physician and author, and John A. Brown, former Professor Emeritus of History at Wenatchee Valley College, Washington, into this book. As white men, their writings reflect an outsider's perspective on the Chinook tribe, as does their source material that they pulled from, the captain's logs and accounts of other white sailors, traders and explorers. However, it should be noted that they both have conducted more research and produced more books on this topic than any other scholars. Unlike most researchers, they also used oral histories, transcribing them by hand during multiple visits to all of the tribal lands that they mention. Their other sources include tribal documents, government documents, photographic evidence, and artistic renderings. This book offers insights into the early

stages of cultural contact between Chinookan and Euro-Americans before the start of the 18th century, and describes the visit of the Lewis and Clark expedition, at which point the Chinookans were already trading with Euro-Americans, helping to set the stage for their own rapid extinction at the hands of these newcomers. It also details how the development of Astoria in Oregon effectively removed control of the fur trade on the Columbia River from the Chinookans, and concludes by discussing their scattered and largely assimilated descendants who are still fighting for federal recognition from the United States government and for equitable treatment from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I am including a summary of this book and its recorded history in the paragraphs below. In 2024, the Chinook Indian Nation is still working to regain federal recognition, which they first received in 2001, but it was only in place for approximately 18 months before being revoked (chinooknation.org).

Well before Lewis and Clark sailed up the Columbia River, Chinook traders were affected by diseases brought by Spanish and white colonists that plagued susceptible natives in a death swath, wiping out nearly three quarters of a village near present day Ilwaco at some point near 1750. This began a practice that lasted into the late 19th century of the native survivors torching their lodges, clothing and other belongings to prevent the spread of disease through fire. Smallpox returned at the turn of the 19th century, and Lewis and Clark noted the pock marked faces of the survivors. For years, skeletons of victims lay bleached on the shorelines because during the worst years, the survivors could no longer bury the numerous dead. How many lives were lost will never be known, but eyewitness accounts report vast devastation. Tuberculosis and venereal disease were also spread by sailors and traders to natives who had no immune resistance; these quickly spread through the tribes because many Chinook women, whose wills and bodies were owned by their spouses in marriage, were prostituted to the Euro-Americans by their husbands for their profit. Two decades of trade by sea shifted the tribe's moral culture, increasing marital infidelity. (Ruby et. al, *The Chinook Indians*)

A primary reason for the tribe's "passing on" was through the slave trade. The Chinooks actively practiced slavery with no qualms and frequently traded children to ship's captains. Some captains raided coastal villages to take slaves without trading for them.

“Perhaps the most notorious American slave dealer on the Northwest Coast was George W. Eayers (Eayrs), captain of the American ship *Mercury*, who sailed the region in that ship after 1806. On one occasion he spirited a dozen native males from the mouth of the Columbia River, but seven of them escaped by stealing a boat and making it to shore.” (Ruby et al, *The Chinook Indians*, page 116)

On November 26, 1805 the Lewis and Clark expedition crossed the Columbia River to a “village of nine houses” where the party met the Kathlamet tribe and made camp until December 7. Shortly after Christmas, a young Wahkiakum chief accompanied by four men and two women brought the party skins and other items to trade, prior to the white explorers completing construction of a fort in the area, on the southern bank of the river in Clatsop territory. The expedition was careful not to offend their native neighbors, because the long winter made them depend on the tribes for their food and other supplies. On January 10, the Kathlamet chief Shalharwarcap and his followers bartered a large amount of food for a very small medal. In March, the Lewis and Clark expedition purchased canoes from the Kathlamets as they prepared for their long voyage home.

The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) was a British trading corporation founded in 1670, originally chartered to control trade and settlement in the lands surrounding Hudson Bay in present-day Canada. For over two centuries, it was one of the most powerful commercial enterprises in North America, functioning almost like a government in some regions. Its primary business was the fur trade, exchanging European goods such as metal tools, firearms, and textiles for animal pelts, especially beaver, trapped by Indigenous peoples. By the early 19th century, the HBC expanded its operations into the Pacific Northwest, establishing Fort Vancouver (1824–1825) on the Columbia River as the headquarters of its Columbia Department. From there, it managed trade, oversaw settlement, and became a central colonial presence, profoundly shaping the economy and social relations of the region.

The Hudson's Bay Company first arrived on the Columbia River in 1824–1825 to establish Fort Vancouver. They and the British established command of the lower river at Fort George, which was managed by James Birnie, who married a half-Chinook and half-Tillamook native wife. In 1844, reinforcements from the Roman Catholic Church arrived, and Birnie assisted their ship in navigating the river. Father Joseph Louis Lionet was sent at the end of 1848 to establish a mission at Astoria, but he chose to establish it on the northern side of the Columbia River, on the side of the river where the town of Cathlamet is located.

“By 1850 most of the settlers venturing north of the Columbia were former company people who were familiar with the country and married mostly to native women. Birnie, like another company man named Anderson who had preceded him north of the Columbia near a place that Birnie eventually called Cathlamet, had seemed like no intruder to Indians when he moved there in 1846 and they helped him clear his land.” (Ruby et al, *The Chinook Indians*, page 215)

Birnie and a handful of other men were the only whites in the area to initially take advantage of The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850, also known as the Oregon Donation Land Act, a law passed by the United States Congress to encourage settlement of the West. The law allowed white male citizens to claim 320 acres of land for free, and married couples could claim 640 acres. The law also allowed Indian women who married white men to claim half of their husband's land, making it one of the first laws in the United States to allow married women to own property under their own name. Displaced, the Kathlamet tribe joined the Wahkiakum tribe in their small villages upstream. The total number of natives who were left living in the area at this time had been reduced to 185 people living in 37 houses. (Ruby et. al, *The Chinook Indians*)

Stores for the Hudson's Bay Company's men opened and began selling alcohol, which added a volatile new dimension to the culture along the river at that time. Chinooks established a provision with the

Washington territory's legislature to stop the sale of alcohol to tribal members, but it was not prosecuted or followed. The Governor recommended that the natives be removed from settlements and confined to reservations, under the guise of protecting them from liquor trafficking. On August 9, 1951 in a treaty the Kathlamet people ceded their lands running along the south side of the Columbia River, including Astoria, for a limited annuity of cash and goods. The government did not make good on their promises (see timeline attached at the end of this essay), and trade at this point was virtually extinct. Relocated from their homes, demoralized after their numbers dropped devastatingly low, many of the tribe's remaining members succumbed to alcoholism and addiction. Many natives avoided reservations by remaining along the lower Columbia and the coast. On January 12, 1854, a census from the Columbia to the mouth of the Cowlitz River reported of the Wahkiakums and the Kathlamets that only eleven men, nine women, eight slaves, and three children remained. In 1906, Congress authorized funds to investigate the validity of tribal claims of legitimacy and in that investigation, the Office of Indian Affairs reported in 1907 that although Chinooks, Clatsops, Wahkiakums and Kathlamets had "ceded certain lands in 1851, the act of cessation did not mean ownership of the land, and that if the treaties and correspondence setting forth their needs did not provide sufficient merit to justify ratification in 1852, "it would seem preposterous to give them any recognition 55 years afterward."'" However, each tribe was awarded payment for their lands. From then on, it has been touch and go for the Chinooks as far as providing proof of being an identifiable group of Indians. (Ruby et. al, *The Chinook Indians*)

Robert H. Rudy and John A. Brown also authored another book called *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest* with co-author Cary C. Collins, an encyclopedic guide of the native peoples living along the Puget Sound and the Pacific Coast, listed in alphabetical order. It includes a detailed description of the history and culture of each tribe. The narratives are accessible and easy to read, and include short bibliographies at the end of each section. Their guide states that while resembling the lower Chinook peoples in many ways, the Kathlamets had their own linguistic dialect. It is believed that they belonged to the Chinook and Clatsop tribes before each faction splintered, causing the Kathlamets to start their own villages sometime around the middle of the

19th century; based on the timeline given in Ruby and Brown's book that would place the separation of the tribes about 50 years or so after the Lewis and Clark expedition came ashore, almost at the exact point when the Roman Catholic Church arrived and when James Birnie founded the town of Cathlamet. Their tribal lands were located on the Oregon side of the Columbia River before they were displaced and forced to join the Wahkiakum in their northern lands across the water. According to *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest*, the Cathlamet homelands lay on the south bank of the Columbia from about Astoria to Puget Island, and also included lands on the Columbia's north bank, near where the present day town of Cathlamet is located. On August 24, 1912, the U.S. Court of Claims awarded the tribe's descendants \$7,000 for the loss of their lands, and awarded the Wahkiakum the same amount.

The Wahkiakums spoke the same Kathlamet dialect, and were also related to the Chinook and Clatsop tribes. Washington Irving wrote in *Astoria* (1837) that the Wahkiakum and the Chinook were basically the same people. Irving stated that there were roughly 66 Wahkiakum warriors, which supported Lewis and Clark's estimate of 200 Wahkiakums total in 1805-1806. Abbe Domenech in *Seven Years' Residence in the Great Deserts of North America* (1860) wrote that the Wahkiakums were one of four clans to include the Cathlamet, Clatsop, and Chinook, and that they all splintered off into separate factions around the middle of the 18th century due to headmen infighting. One of the most important Wahkiakum villages was located near present day Cathlamet, Washington in Wahkiakum County. The Wahkiakum headman in 1841 was named Skamakowa; believed to be one of the last survivors of his peoples by ethnologist George Gibbs, he bore the same name as Skamakowa, Washington, the closest neighboring town to the current city of Cathlamet. A primary motivation given in *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest* for the Chinooks, Clatsops, Kathlamets and Wahkiakums signing a treaty with the government in 1851 for their lands in exchange for the very short ten year annuity and small amount of goods was due to the tribes all fearing their extinction at the time, focusing on their short term survival. Because the Wahkiakum people are not federally recognized, they do not have guaranteed fishing rights, and in 1981 a federal court upheld a ruling by the U.S. District Court denying the tribe's

fishing rights claims. (Ruby et. al, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Pacific Northwest*)

Living in the town of Cathlamet for several years made me very curious to hear the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes' version of events. Seeking further information, on July 20, 2024, I interviewed Sam Robinson, Vice Chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation, which comprises the Kathlamet, Clatsop, Lower Chinook, Willapa, and Wahkiakum tribes located on either side of the Columbia River and its basin. He gave me further information about the tribe's current efforts at land reclamation, the ongoing fight to obtain federal recognition and protected status, restoration of local foodways, education programs and the tribe's reclamations of traditional knowledge, and connected me with additional resources and points of contact within the tribe. Ruby et. al's *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest* was first published in 1986; his book *The Chinook Indians: Traders of the Lower Columbia River* was published in 1976, and went to paperback in 1988. For the next two decades, these and a handful of other books by the same authors remained a premier authority and the most widely available academic sources for the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum histories. More recently, efforts have been made to give a voice to the voiceless by telling the story from the indigenous perspective, which Sam Robinson informed me of during our interview. In 2013, *Chinookan Peoples of the Lower Columbia* was published, a more culturally sensitive and historically accurate account. It was written by several white male authors and academics, Robert T. Boyd and Kenneth M. Ames, but was also edited by Tony A. Johnson, the chair of the Cultural Committee for the Chinook Tribe and the manager for the Education Program for the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe. In 2017, *Chinook Resilience: Heritage and Cultural Revitalization on the Lower Columbia River* was published, which also includes a forward by Tony A. Johnston; this book is an ethnography authored in collaboration with the Chinook Nation. Comparing these two more recent and modern works with the content found in the books written by Ruby and Brown several decades earlier allows for a richer, fuller, more detailed history of the tribes and a clearer understanding of their unique culture to emerge.

While Robert Rudy and his co-authors presented historical accounts of events which I have summarized here, their literature seemed

dry and stark compared to the information in *Chinookan Peoples of the Columbia River*, which presents a richer, more vivid picture of pre-colonial indigenous life reaching back to 12500 BC, including detailed descriptions of the Chinook's myths, dancing traditions, dietary habits, and social structure prior to the 1800s which included "a hereditary caste of slaves and ranked nobility". Claiming a rich culture that was far more sophisticated and advanced than is typically understood, the Chinook had orally transmitted literature that included poetry. They made art, and they kept vast gardens of managed wild plants.

"After 1811, land-based fur traders grouped people together who lived around the Lower Columbia. Astorian Alexander Ross went farther than Lewis and Clark, combining not only the groups they listed but also Kalamas, "Cattleputtles," Clatskanies, and Multnomahs as "descended from the same stock.'" (Boyd, page 148)

The name Chinook came originally from the name of a village, c'inuk, that was located in the Columbia River estuary. The early Euro-Americans adopted the name for all of the peoples living there and eventually extended it to everyone who spoke Chinookian, on both sides of the Columbia river from its mouth up to the Dalles. The Kathlamets were regarded as having a distinct separate language. Political tribal identities did not exist within the indigenous peoples who lived there, and it should be noted that the separate tribal affiliations were originally a Euro-American concept that was imposed upon the tribes; the names of the various tribes were a construct that was invented by whites. Modern anthropologists continue to divide areas and peoples into separate cultures by attempting to categorize them by their traits. The Chinookans traditionally identified themselves through their families and villages, but lacked territorial claims and political institutions such as councils and chiefs prior to contact with the Euro-American people in 1792. It was only after widespread diseases and epidemics devastated the indigenous populations that tribal politics became firmly established, in response to

becoming a minority in their own lands. The tribes were required to evolve in order to respond to the new threat of an oppressive government and its institutions being imposed on the tribes. (Boyd, *Chinookan Peoples of the Columbia River*)

Lewis and Clark sometimes used the word “tribe” to indicate a smaller subset of the larger Indian Nation as a whole, and other times used “tribe” to refer to a village or group, which blurred the lines of indigenous identities. They also did not distinguish between Chinook slaves and Chinook free people, thinking them all to be primitives. *Chinookan Peoples of the Columbia River* gives a deeper understanding of the Lower Chinookan peoples and how they were refined and affiliated with other groups, and answers the question of “what happened to the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes?” by explaining that the division of indigenous peoples into different groups was primarily created by whites, as were the concepts of the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes to begin with. Their adoption of separate tribal identities and political structures are a direct response to the continued legal struggles for federal recognition, which is literally a fight for their survival.

“The Chinook Indian Tribe/Chinook Nation is a politically united community of people who descend primarily from the five westernmost groups of Chinookan-speaking people: Lower Chinook, Clatsop, Willapa, Wahkiakum, and Kathlamet. These formerly independent tribes were always associated with one another, but only since the late 1800s have they formed a united community.” (Boyd et. al, page 5)

The latter part of *Chinookan Peoples of the Columbia River* provides more details on the affairs of the tribe and their lengthy fight for Federal recognition. The book *Chinook Resilience: Heritage and Cultural Revitalization on the Lower Columbia River* expands on the tribe’s rich history and their torrid and tumultuous past. The author Jon D. Daehnke was an assistant professor of anthropology when he first approached the Chinook Nation. Another white man in academia, he was

not intending to write a book at first, it developed organically through his numerous interactions with the tribe. This is a very important book, not just to the Chinooks but to anthropologists and society as a whole, because it decolonizes the historical narrative by avoiding a Western approach (“constructed around ideas of documenting” Daehnke, page 6) and instead “centers on the continuing role colonialism plays in claims to heritage in the present, claims that are often contested” (page 5). Tony A. Johnson, Chair of the Chinook Indian Nation, wrote in the foreword “Without the blinders of government policy or the influence of others, he (Daehnke) has seen us for who we are. What a gift it would be if the federal government would come to see us in the same way” (pg. xiii). Daehnke himself wrote that “The Chinook could have been skeptical of this project given the dubious relationship between anthropologists and Indigenous communities historically” (pg. xv). This positive change in approach to studying anthropology offers a new ethical model for researchers attempting to study other cultures outside of their own. Colonial invasion created a long and bloody history of assimilation and dispossession, and one of the ways this is still perpetuated to this day is through the erasure of the tribes by transferring authority over their culture and heritage to the invading government and its institutions (“whitewashing”). Decolonizing efforts are being made today to put the narrative back into the hands of the Chinook Nation where it belongs.

Tony Johnson notes that before the introduction of alcohol, deaths due to drowning were very rare, but many Chinook died from alcohol related drownings after the whites arrived. Daehnke’s book also discusses in detail the horrors of the Indian boarding schools, which was omitted from Ruby et. al’s accounts. Because the Chinooks lacked treaties and had no lands, their children were taken from them and forced to attend these schools, whose goal was to “kill the Indian to save the child” (Daehnke, page 53). This created substantial trauma both to the children and to their parents who were left behind. A US Department of the Interior report released in July 2024 found that at least 973 Native American children died in U.S. run schools, and a Washington Post investigation found that sexual abuse was rampant (Cooper). This figure given by the Federal government is another example of whitewashing, because Native Nations scholars estimate that almost 40,000 children have died at Indigenous boarding schools (Zaru). The boarding schools are the reason why

the timeline of the Roman Catholic Church's arrival coinciding with the point when James Birnie founded the town of Cathlamet is so important, and the omission of that timeline from both the earlier works of Robert Rudy as well as the commonly accepted historical narrative is another perfect example of whitewashing. If the historical marker outside of the Wahkiakum County Courthouse was being ethically and historically accurate, it would state that as part of the Euro-American's intentional and extremely organized military extermination of the Chinook people, the Catholic Church stole their children from them, which then allowed James Birnie to possess their lands and found his town of Cathlamet.¹

According to a 2022 United States Census Bureau report, there were only 13 Native Americans living in Wahkiakum County, down from 101 reported in 2016. The Wahkiakum and Cathlamet people are still here, they have not "passed on" quite yet. While researching for this paper, I frequently thought of a quote by James Baldwin, American writer and civil rights activist, that stated "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain." In a similar line of thinking, I imagine that the only reason we are still accepting the whitewashing of our nation's rich and complicated histories is because we do not want to face uncomfortable truths, and have been coping with generations of trauma and pain through avoidance and denial, both by those who experienced it and by those who have perpetuated it. In order to move forward as a country and heal, these hard facts must be brought to light and dealt with ethically and responsibly. As the renowned Swiss psychologist Carl Jung once contended, "what you resist not only persists, but will grow in size." It is my hope that by bringing awareness to their continued plight as well as to their tumultuous past, I will be able to assist in correcting the injustice that has plagued them for over two hundred and fifty years. I would eventually like to see the historical marker sign outside of the

¹ I have included a historical timeline for the period of time between about 1800-1930 following the annotated bibliography at the end of this document, to show how all of these events correlated with each other as part of an elaborate and strategic military action taken by the Roman Catholic Church and other colonizing forces, against the Chinook Tribe and Indigenous Americans as a whole.

Wahkiakum County Courthouse corrected to reflect the indigenous perspective of historical events as well as the more commonly accepted white Euro-American version, and I hope to gain public support by sharing this research to create awareness of the historical inaccuracies that are being presented, and the injustice that continues to affect the Chinook Indian Nation by perpetuating this misinformation and minimizing their existence. I enjoyed learning more about the Chinook and am grateful for their help and willingness to share their knowledge with me, and for the opportunity they gave me to share with others what I have learned from them and about them.

Key Footnote of Historical Importance

*** The Chinook Indian Nation was federally acknowledged as a tribe in 2001, but that status was revoked 18 months later by the Bush administration. They have been fighting to regain access to programs and resources that they should be entitled to ever since.

Interview Source Cited

Robinson, Sam. *Chinook Indian Nation, Vice Chairman*. Accessed 20 July 2024.

On July 20th in Cathlamet Washington, I interviewed Sam Robinson, Vice Chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation, which comprises the Cathlamet, Clatsop, Lower Chinook, Willapa, and Wahkiakum tribes located on either side of the Columbia River and its basin. He gave me information about the tribe's current efforts at land reclamation, the ongoing fight to obtain federal recognition and protected status, restoration of local foodways, education programs and the tribe's reclamations of traditional knowledge. He later connected me with additional resources and points of contact within the tribe through email.

Annotated Bibliography

Boyd, Robert T, et al. *Chinookan Peoples of the Lower Columbia*. Seattle, University Of Washington Press, 2015.

I ordered this book off of Amazon for this project, because it was the second book that came highly recommended by Sam Robinson, Chinook Indian Vice Chairman. Sam said in our interview that this is a Cathlamet Text in which Franz Boas recorded stories spoken by Charles Cultee, a Chinook man. It tells of the Chinook people's history from 10,000 years ago to present day, and discusses the recent discovery of Cathlapotle, a village that was located on the Columbia River floodplain near the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area.

Budd, Monica. *Cathlamet, Washington | Explore Wahkiakum County*. 5 Apr. 2016, wahkiakum.us/visitor-info/cathlamet-washington/. Accessed 16 July 2024. I used this article to compare the currently accepted "white-washed" version of history, specifically the brief overview of the town of Cathlamet's history since settlement and contrast the public version with the authentic tribal sources I have found. The official version reported from the Wahkiakum County Chamber of Commerce on their website is "Lewis & Clark found the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes living here during their Northwest Expedition, which passed the area in 1805. James Birnie of Hudson Bay Company settled here in 1846 and named the area Birnie's Retreat. The name was later changed to Cathlamet in 1851."

Daehnke, Jon Darin. *Chinook Resilience*. Indigenous Confluences, 2017.

This book is available online through the library at the LCC learning commons, and came recommended by Sam Robinson during our interview. This book is a collective ethnography of the Chinook Indian Nation and shows how they remain resilient

and culturally significant while facing federal nonrecognition. It details the history of the tribe and the challenges that they continue to face in attempting to control their own history and heritage.

“The Kathlamets.” *Discover Lewis & Clark*, 4 June 2021, lewis-clark.org/native-nations/chinookan-peoples/kathlamets/#:~:text=Linguistically%2C%20the%20Kathlamets%20spoke%20their. Accessed 16 July 2024. I used this article to compare and contrast the currently accepted “whitewashed” version of history with the authentic tribal sources I have found. This article discusses how the Kathlamet Indians moved their entire tribe almost immediately upon making first contact with an expedition of white men coming up the Columbia River. The Kathlamets joined the similar speaking Wahkiakum tribe after relocating. Written by the Lewis and Clark Foundation, the ethos of this article is questionable because it views the Chinook people through an outside or non-indigenous culture and a colonized lens (assuming that whiteness gives one moral superiority, or rights to claim lands that are already populated). This article cites Boyd, Robert T, et al. *Chinookan Peoples of the Lower Columbia* as well as *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest* by Robert H. Rudy, John A. Brown, and Cary C. Collins.

Robinson, Sam. “Chinook Indian Nation, Vice Chairman.” Received by Isha Snow, 20 July 2024.

On July 20th in Cathlamet Washington, I interviewed Sam Robinson, Vice Chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation, which comprises the Cathlamet, Clatsop, Lower Chinook, Willapa, and Wahkiakum tribes located on either side of the Columbia River and its basin. He gave me information about the tribe's current efforts at land reclamation, the ongoing fight to obtain federal recognition and protected status, restoration of local foodways, education programs and the tribe's reclamations of traditional knowledge. He also referred me to additional resources and points of contact within the tribe.

Ruby, Robert H, and John A Brown. *The Chinook Indians*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

This book is available on the second floor of the library at Lower Columbia College, and it details the history of the Chinook Indians prior to, during, and after the arrival of white colonial settlers to the Columbia River, including Cathlamet. It answers the question in my paper of what happened to the tribes; alcohol; new diseases such as smallpox, influenza, and venereal disease; intertribal warfare; and the growing number of white settlers soon led to the near extinction of the Chinooks. By 1951 when the first treaty was made between them and the United States government, they were living in small, fragmented bands scattered throughout the territory. Today they are attempting to acquire recognition from the federal government, to establish a new tribal economy within the capitalist colonial system.

Ruby, Robert H, et al. *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest*. University of Oklahoma Press, 27 Feb. 2013. This book is available on the second floor of the Lower Columbia College library and has served as the authoritative text on tribes from California to British Columbia for the past two decades. This revised edition includes updated information regarding the renewed efforts of the tribes to gain self determination from the federal government.

Who We Are – Chinook Indian Nation | Chinook Tribe. chinook-nation.org/who-we-are/. Accessed 16 July 2024.

I referenced the Chinook Tribe's website for a description of the tribe made in their own words. Due to previous attempts to whitewash their history, I feel it is very important to hear the tribe by centering their voice as the main perspective for my paper. "Our Nation's constitution was first drafted in 1925 by the Tribal leaders of these Tribes and was later amended in the early 1950s. The constitution outlines Tribal membership criteria and clearly references five Anson Dart treaties signed by our

ancestors at Tansy Point in 1851, it is also one of the oldest living tribal constitutions in the Pacific Northwest.” The political history tab on their website <https://chinooknation.org/political-history/> lists in detail most of the conversation that I had in person during my interview with Sam Robinson regarding the tribe’s history to become federally recognized.

Chinook, Wahkiakum and Kathlamet Historical Timeline

- 1792 The first non-Indian entered the Columbia River, American fur trader Robert Gray

- mid 1700-early 1800 Euro-American diseases devastated the local indigenous population, who had no immunities to smallpox, tuberculosis, venereal and other diseases

- 1805-1806 Lewis and Clark met surviving Kathlamets from the south bank and crossed the river, making camp where the present-day community of Skamakowa is located

- 1800s For a generation white Euro-Americans visited to trade, especially for furs

- 1824 The Hudson's Bay Company first arrived on the Columbia River to establish Fort Vancouver

- 1844 The Roman Catholic Church arrives and with them, Indian Boarding Schools, which forcibly removed indigenous children from their families

- 1846 James Birnie of the Hudson Bay Company and his family settled permanently in Wahkiakum County and set up a trading post, which would later become the town of Cathlamet; alcohol is sold to natives, which results in a multitude of deaths and drownings

- 1848 A local mission was established by Father Joseph Louis Lionet
- 1850s The Donation Land Claim Act or Oregon Donation Land Act by the United States Congress was passed to encourage settlement of the West, and homesteaders began farming the Elochoman Valley near Cathlamet; The Kathlamet tribe was displaced, and joined the neighboring Wahkiakum tribe
- 1851 The Kathlamet and Wahkiakum peoples, along with the Clatsop, Lower Chinook, and Willapa tribes, ceded their lands for a limited annuity that the government never made good on
- 1853 Washington territory was established and one year later (1854), Wahkiakum County was incorporated
- 1854 A census from the Columbia to the mouth of the Cowlitz River reported of the Wahkiakums and the Kathlamets that only eleven men, nine women, eight slaves, and three children remained
- 1870s Scandinavian immigrants arrive
- 1895 The Cathlamet Pioneer Church was built on top of a spring which provided a significant source of fresh water to the local tribe; the spring has since been named after Queen Sally, former head of the Kathlamet tribe, who met with Lewis and Clark as a young girl
- 1925 The Chinook tribes drafted a Chinook Indian Nation constitution, referencing the five tribes treaties in 1851
- 1930 The last native speakers of the Kathlamet dialect died, and the language was considered extinct

Cathlamet Cultural Heritage Project

I visited Queen Sally's Well along the Lewis and Clark trail in the town of Cathlamet, Washington. Cathlamet is located across from Puget Island along the bank of the Columbia River, and is an important historical site of note because it was the largest Native American settlement West of the Cascades prior to colonization, and was one of the very first points of contact when colonial European explorers and settlers entered the Columbia River from the Pacific Ocean. This site holds utmost significance as it is direct evidence of a strategic, organized erasure of Indigenous people and their culture.

The plaque marker states that it marks the spot of an ancient artisanal spring that is located near Sally's Well, an important source of drinking water for thousands of years, described as "the lifeblood" of the early Chinook tribes that Kathlamet and Wahkiakum who lived here before being exterminated by white colonial settlers. It shows pictures of baskets, interiors of longhouses, and photographs of Chinook Indian natives. It also indicates there are many Chinook descendants enrolled and living throughout the local community today. There is not very much information specifically about Queen Sally on the sign, but other historical accounts state that she was the last surviving chief and leader of the Kathlamet tribe, and she had interacted with Lewis and Clark in her youth. She is a prominent figure of local tribal heritage and has another sign dedicated to her at the Elochoman Slough Marina in Cathlamet.





When I first moved to Cathlamet five years ago, I initially read the marker for this site and assumed that the Pioneer church had been built directly on top of the naturally occurring fresh water spring. It is a common colonial tactic for invading forces to seize control of local resources, creating indigenous dependence on their invaders. When the town of Cathlamet (formerly Birnie's Creek) was initially established, Europeans set up their base camp around the local tribe's water source, and that base camp eventually did become the area that the church is on now, but the water source itself is located several yards away under a home nearby. When local properties first became available for purchase after settlers divided their lots into parcels, the initial owner of the property that the well sits on decided to pave over it when they built their house. Sally's Well itself is actually located underneath a house that is currently for sale; you can see the peak of that house's roof sitting on top of the well, between the two trees in the picture above, just above the site marker. The house for sale states on its Redfin website listing that it was "Once the site of Queen Sally's Well on the Lewis & Clark Trail," but that listing doesn't specify what happened to the well itself. Neither does the site marker. I had to go to the library, which is the building directly below the Pioneer Church and the historical site marker for Sally's Well, and ask the librarian for more information. She referred me to a book called "Beach of Heaven" by Irene Martin for a more complete local history regarding Sally's

Well. Personally, I find it odd that the site marker is nowhere near the actual well itself and doesn't reference what happened to it or why. This seems almost deliberately vague, ambiguous and misleading, similar to the historical marker outside of the Wahkiakum County courthouse down the street that claims the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes "lived here and passed on," without indicating what happened or why.

A web search of Sally's Well revealed an article discussing the problems the town has experienced architecturally. Due to the spring having been paved over and sealed, structures are being undermined as water from the spring has been diverted underneath Pioneer Church, the town library, and further south of the hill to the Town Hall building which is where I live. According to the DJC article from 2010, "The whole hill just leaks water. We were getting the spring water coming up beneath the floors of the buildings." This is evidence of *weitiko*, a spiritual sickness that causes violence, impulsivity, and insane, self-destructive behaviors like damaging shared public areas in an attempt to hoard resources and control others.



Here is a picture of the library at the bottom of the hill, with the Pioneer church situated just above it. Water from the spring, formerly Sally's Well, is known to run directly below both buildings and underneath the hill itself, due to water flow being diverted from its natural outlet which was paved over.



This is a picture of Pioneer Church located on the hill just below Sally's Well. The home that was built on top of Sally's Well can be seen in the very right-hand side of the photograph above the parked vehicle in the church parking lot.



In this final picture, you can see the library's storm drain at the bottom of the hill, with an accumulation of standing water around it.

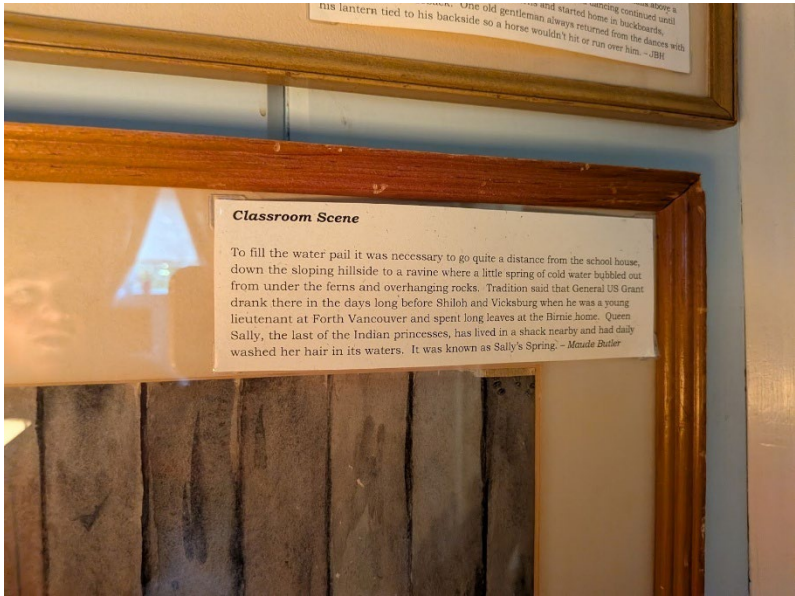
Prior to colonization, the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes were part of a vast network of indigenous society spanning the entirety of the North Americas. They specifically belong to the Chinook Indian Nation, which shares some similarities with the larger Coastal Salish group from the same northwestern region (fishing, plank houses), but their cultures and linguistics are distinctly separate.

After the tribes were decimated from organized starvation, warfare, diseases, structural violence, weaponized poverty and addiction, colonial settlers moved in to parasitically invade indigenous lands. The area has a strong historical connection to Norwegian and other Scandinavian communities and the culture and heritage of early Norwegian immigrants remain an important part of the town's identity. Puget Island, which is adjacent to Cathlamet across the Columbia River from Oregon state, was a popular destination for early Norwegian dairy farmers due to its fertile riverbank grassland grazing areas. Many families from Norway's Helgeland province settled here with Puget Island a destination for early Norwegian dairy farmers, fishermen, loggers and families from Norway's Helgeland province. Local media archives in Cathlamet's public Museum show that Scandinavian traditions, such as baking hardanger lefse, are still practiced by residents. Today, the population is primarily white, with a 2010 census summary for Wahkiakum County reporting 19.8% of residents with Norwegian ancestry.

Julia Butler Hansen was a prominent local politician who served in the US House of Representatives from 1960-1974. Her house located on Main Street in Cathlamet is a local landmark and contains a lifetime of her collected heirlooms and documents. The home and items are lovingly curated by her surviving son. Inside the Hansen house are multiple works of art displayed on the walls and this collection includes a portrait of a white colonial boy pictured in a pioneer schoolhouse situated just north of Sally's Well. In the picture, the boy holds a pail of water. The description attached to the picture describes how the boy had to walk a long distance to the well to retrieve the water prior to its being sealed. This establishes that the resource was still being used by settlers after its seizure and appropriation by invasive colonial forces.

Autism In America





Another picture on Hansen's wall displays artwork of a small cabin-like structure that is identified as the single room pioneer school building that the boy was shown in.



The vagueness and ambiguity on the site marker for Sally's Well, the strategic targeting of Indigenous water supply that local tribes understood as a gift from

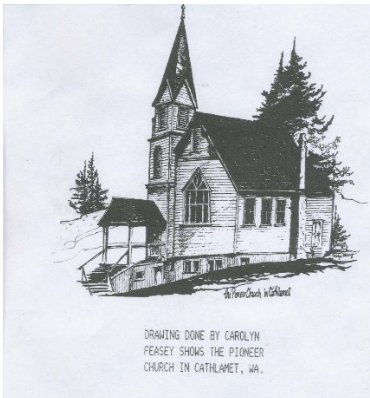
Autism In America

Source (God) for thousands of years, the extermination of an entire race and culture, and their continued erasure publicly and politically all indicate a culture of shame and structural violence that continues to be acted out on both indigenous peoples and colonial settlers in multiple ways including but not limited to social norms based on emotional avoidance, coercive control, and hierarchical, exploitative and extractive power dynamics.

Outwardly, Cathlamet is a bustling active community that is engaged and supportive. There are multiple community events each month filled with friendly faces and neighbors who are quick to help in times of need. I arrived here in a time of crisis and found a town that is held together by a cohesive network of strong family and community ties. But underneath this exterior lies an uncomfortable truth that, because it has been left avoided for centuries, continues to seep to the surface while causing immeasurable amounts of unseen relational trauma and structural damage to society just below what is seen, within the realm of what is intuitively experienced, felt and embodied.

The Pioneer Church, located just below the site of Sally's Well, is a prominent structure and the focal point of the town with its steeples looming above the Columbia River and overlooking Puget Island. It was strategically erected by colonial settlers near the site of a natural water source that was previously used by indigenous peoples for thousands of years with the intent to use the proximity of the church and other colonial structures to control tribal access to local resources.

The below ink drawing by Carolyn Feasey of the Pioneer Church in Cathlamet, Washington is copyrighted by the Cathlamet Public Library.



Autism In America

The Pioneer church was built in 1895 according to the Pioneer Community Association, whose mission is to maintain the building for community use. The website for the PCA lists the church as a meeting space and a popular local venue for the arts and community performances. It hosts children's musicals, local musicians, plays and theatre performances, and more on a rotating, monthly basis. Weddings, parties, auctions, book signings, and other events occur here every year as part of its role as a thriving town center and community gathering spot. The basement of the church is used for weekly library events such as book sales and children's reading hour. The site marker for Sally's Well does not attract many tourists or visitors, and it represents at most a passing curiosity for locals located next to the much busier church and library.



Sally's Well has been sealed and a house was built on top of it. The area next to the sign marker is being used by the local library and a Pioneer church turned community center. The sign marker for this historical site is located some distance from the actual location of Sally's Well, with no indication on the sign as to its actual location or what happened to it. Locals are inconvenienced by the water leakages and seepage caused by the well's sealing. The general public views the sign on a patch of grass and likely assumes that the well is directly below the grass next to the church, just like I did before I was able to get more information from the local librarian. The well and sign itself are mostly treated as afterthoughts by both visitors and locals.

What I find most interesting about this site is not any specific information per se, but rather the general ambiguity and lack of any specific information at all. There are barely any details about Queen Sally and her well and absolutely no mention as to why it was covered, or where it is even located anywhere at or near the actual site. This information is suspiciously absent from internet searches as well. This site is clear evidence of active and ongoing colonization in the United States and in this case, silence is violence. Not discussing the atrocities that continue to be committed against Indigenous peoples ignores needed structural changes and allows their continuance. What fascinates me is how the members of the town including myself can walk past this evidence of colonial violence in front of them daily like this site and sign, and not think anything of it because this type of violence has been so normalized by United States colonial culture. It truly speaks to the wonders of the human mind and how selective its memory and perception can be when the forgetting of facts becomes necessary for one's continued survival within an oppressive imperial regime. On a micro-cosmic scale, this site represents the repressed shame of an entire culture and the physical and mental strain placed on an entire society due to sustained mass cognitive dissonance. Ignoring the crimes committed against humanity without any accountability or ownership for the harm done by European colonists might hide the collective pain but it does nothing to resolve it; restorative justice movements, support of Indigenous-led Land Back efforts to re-indigenize and decolonize the Americas and planet as a whole, and creating safe spaces for truth telling and questioning dominant narratives will.

My English 102 class at Lower Columbia College centered around a quarter-long research project about a cultural heritage site. I spent three months putting together the previous essay and research regarding the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes, who were displaced when Captain James Birnie colonized their villages, creating Birnie's Retreat (later renamed to the town of Cathlamet, where I currently live). The Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes are part of the Chinook Indian Nation. I researched the landmark sign outside the Wahkiakum County Courthouse due to ambiguous and vague claims made that the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes had "lived here and passed on" without taking any ownership and accountability as to why this may have occurred. This claim is erroneous because tribal members still reside in the county (as of the 2020 U.S. Census data, 31 individuals in Wahkiakum County identified as American Indian, which was a 59.2% decrease from an earlier estimate. A source in 2023 from the American Community Survey (ACS) identified 15 individuals as Indigenous, which documents their continued decline yet also confirms their obvious existence, standing in clear contradiction to the landmark's claims).

How incredibly gaslighted and invalidated must those Indigenous members of our community be feeling, I thought at the time of my writing (and still do daily while walking by the sign). It falsely positions colonialism as something that has happened in the past, rather than accurately portraying the active and ongoing attempt of the United States to exterminate an entire people and culture. The Chinook are a people who tragically never decided to go to war but were put in a position of defending themselves on their own lands, which were then lost to them, meanwhile our county seat preemptively claims their extinction, aiding in their erasure. My research specifically recommends the town of Cathlamet to correct the landmark sign with a factual statement in a reparative effort to the local indigenous tribal members. I plan on donating half of the proceeds of each Kindle and paperback copy of this book sold back to the Chinook Indian Nation and my own Lenape Nation, to assist in tribal restoration and decolonial efforts and as a way to provide direct support and acknowledgement to the rightful stewards of the planet Earth.

Autism Global Mapping Project

Using the timeline and description of colonization of the Kathlamet and Wahkiakum tribes establishes Western psychological diagnostics, methods, treatments and approaches as post-genocidal colonial tools which are currently being imposed on collectivist cultures in an active and ongoing act of epistemological violence.

Abstract:

This project maps the cultural, historical, and structural dimensions of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the United States and compares them to global approaches. Using a biopsychosocial lens, it critiques the dominant biomedical model that frames autism as a deficit and instead highlights the rise of the neurodiversity movement, which reframes autism as a natural variation in human cognition and sociality. The study draws on ethnographic, clinical, and linguistic research to demonstrate how culture shapes diagnosis, treatment access, and identity formation. The U.S. approach to autism is deeply influenced by a deficit-based, dualistic medical model that prioritizes symptom reduction and early intervention for children. While behavioral therapies like ABA dominate, services for adults, especially late-diagnosed or multiply marginalized individuals, are severely lacking. Barriers to care are compounded by disparities based on race, class, gender, and geography. In contrast, some countries in Scandinavia and Western Europe offer state-funded early interventions and inclusive education, aligning more with biopsychosocial or rights-based models. In Africa and parts of East Asia, underdiagnosis, limited research infrastructure, and cultural stigma often delay diagnosis and restrict access to services, although some regions are integrating culturally sensitive interventions. Importantly, the project emphasizes how language and community shape autistic identity. Drawing on Ahearn's theory of communities of practice, it argues that autistic individuals form their own cultural group, defined not just by shared neurology but by distinct communicative practices (e.g., "masking," "stimming," "double empathy problem") and resistance to dominant neurotypical norms. This self-defined culture represents a challenge to traditional psychiatric narratives and supports the creation of affirming, identity-based understandings of autism.

Why This Matters:

It exposes the limitations of the deficit model and calls for a shift to a biopsychosocial framework that honors lived experience, cultural context, and structural realities. It amplifies the voices of autistic communities as active agents in defining their own identities, needs, and strengths. It highlights global disparities in autism diagnosis and care, underlining the importance of culturally responsive and equitable mental health systems. It provides a theoretical and empirical foundation for policy reform, advocacy, and educational innovation, especially in recognizing autism as a form of neurocultural diversity rather than a disorder to be cured.

Main Paper:

Prevalence data: Approximately 1 in 44 children in the United States were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2020); that number increased to 1 in 36 in 2023 (CDC/ADDM, 2023), which is roughly 1-2% of the total United States population. 4:1 time as many boys as girls are diagnosed, which may relate to girls having improved skills at integrating and imitating verbal and nonverbal behaviors. (Mash and Wolfe, 2019)

Cultural Insights: the biomedical model traditionally stigmatizes autism spectrum disorder by viewing it through a deficit model, emphasizing underdeveloped or delayed social and communication skills. The neurodiversity movement is currently reframing autism as a natural human variation, emphasizing their strengths and unique perspectives, and arguing for a biopsychosocial model. (Bagatell, 2010; Fein, 2015)

Treatment methodology: current treatments include behavioral intervention programs such as applied behavioral analysis (ABA), speech and occupational therapies, individualized education program contracts with public school systems. Alternative treatments such as chelation therapy (a therapy for mercury or lead poisoning that binds the toxins in the bloodstream by circulating a chelating solution), medical cannabis, animal therapy and diet have been used (but there is not currently enough data to support the effectiveness of these options).

Challenges to access and care include: high therapy costs, insurance limitations, and geographic and regional limitations to the availability of specialized services in localized areas. Most treatments are marketed towards and only available for school age children, as most insurance companies do not cover services after the age of 18 when a minor becomes an adult. Services for adults with autism particularly for late diagnosed individuals are critically lacking. Disparities between race, socioeconomic status, and rural and urban disparities complicate further access issues to timely diagnosis and intervention. Urban areas typically have more resources and bigger support networks. (Elsabbagh et al, 2012)

Historical Context and Societal Attitudes: the DSM-III (1980) originally classified autism under childhood schizophrenia, but in 1987 a revision clarified it as its own distinct disorder. Later expansions added Asperger syndrome, which was then removed, and is now conceptualized as autism with low support needs. Core deficits of autism spectrum disorder affect social emotional development, language development, and cognitive development. Prevalence estimates vary widely and have changed over time; along with an increase in prevalence came an increase in greater awareness about the disorder and a broadening of the concept, along with greater recognition of milder cases. Families often utilize social media to share stories and to organize around common experiences, which further promotes cultural awareness and support (WHO, 2013) but which also can potentially be places of misinformation.

Autism spectrum disorder in the United States is primarily defined by Western psychiatry's biomedical model, which assumes that diseases and illnesses are caused by physiological abnormalities or biological malfunctions within the body. This dualistic and reductionist medical model is used in healthcare in the United States, and is also referred to as a deficit model, due to the fact that it is built on an understanding that health is defined by the absence of illness, resulting in cultural definitions of normal and abnormal behavior, and the perception of human development as linear and fixed. The biomedical model and the medical understanding of mental disorders as brain diseases, emphasizing pharmacological treatments to target presumed abnormalities, is currently being criticized and questioned as a framework. The biopsychosocial model incorporates biological, psychological, and social factors to

provide a more holistic understanding of psychological disorders. Ochs and Solomon (2010) offer a domain model of sociology which demonstrates how autistic social behavior can best be understood when both biological predispositions and social cultural factors are taken into account. Bagatell (2010) critiqued the traditional biomedical view of autism by focusing on the emergence of autistic support communities, noting that the way autism is defined and understood is deeply influenced by social and cultural factors, not just biological or neurological ones. Fein (2015) emphasized how social environments can either amplify or mitigate autistic challenges, which illustrated a biopsychosocial approach. These three papers all showed that autism can best be understood through the intersection of biological, psychological, and broader social and cultural influences, which is the biopsychosocial model's central perspective. Personal stories, like those shared in the ethnographic studies by Prince (2010) and Ochs and Solomon (2010) showed that some families benefit from strong support networks and early intervention, but also highlighted other families continuing to experience stigma and isolation. They also underscore a need for a more inclusive system.

The approach to autism in the United States is shaped by a mix of significant systemic disparities along with evolving cultural attitudes. Progress towards neurodiversity acceptance is evidenced through the emergence of autistic self-advocacy groups such as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, who have rejected the use of deficit-based language in regards to their human lived experiences. Over the past few decades, public perceptions have evolved due to increased research, the rise of self-advocacy movements, and the broader neurodiversity discourse in communities online (Bagatell, 2010) and is also part of the mainstream media discourse too, though in smaller amounts. Many autistic individuals now represent their lived experiences as a natural variation of human neurobiology and advocate for accommodations as opposed to a "cure". (WHO, 2013; Bagatell, 2010, Carley, n.d.) Ahearn describes communities of practice as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the relational community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which

that membership engages” (p. 133). Autism would qualify as a community of practice because it is defined not only by the individuals who identify as autistic, but also by their unique social norms, communication styles and other practices. Autism is both the membership and the set of practices that autistics engage in such as masking, code switching, or employing specialized vocabulary that is frequently found in neurodivergent online communities such as “double empathy problem” or “stimming”. These practices represent adaptive strategies that allow the members of the autistic community to navigate and challenge neuronormative behaviors and expectations. By doing so, they construct a rich self-affirming autistic cultural identity for themselves. The lived experiences of autistic people shape shared autistic cultural norms and neurodivergent language ideologies, which in turn reinforce a collective neurodivergent identity for members, one that is both internally defined and externally expressed. As outlined in Ahearn’s work, language is a living, evolving system that shapes and is shaped by our social relationships and power dynamics. In the autistic community, terms like masking and stimming have emerged to describe the lived experiences of our neurodivergent realities, which demonstrates how language adapts to resist dominant narratives, exactly as Ahearn describes. “Masking” describes the act of suppressing authentic autistic behavior in order to conform to neuronormative social expectations, whereas “stimming” refers to repetitive physical ticks or behaviors that help to soothe an overstimulated nervous system, or help to manage emotional distress. Within the autistic community of practice, stimming is celebrated as both a communication strategy and coping skill. In this way, this term serves not only as a descriptor of a behavior but also an affirmation of autistic identity. Another common term, “double empathy problem,” describes mutual communication difficulties between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals, and emphasizes that the miscommunication goes in both directions rather than just being a one-way street that leads to the autistic’s door. Eckert’s ethnographic and sociolinguistic fieldwork on the “Jocks” and “Burnouts” (1989) has very strong parallels to the neurotypical and neurodivergent communities; in each example, the two communities of practice define the social landscape for each other.

How the US compares Globally: research suggests that the prevalence of ASD in Western Europe and Scandinavia is roughly similar to

Global estimates, which is about 1% to 1.5% of the population (Elsabagh, et. al, 2012). This is comparable to the US rate of 1-2%. However, these countries have well developed public health systems which offer multidisciplinary early intervention programs, state funded therapies, and inclusive educational policies. In Sweden and Denmark, they provide government-funded early childhood intervention and specialized services for autistic children (WHO, 2013). Autism is increasingly being understood as a neurodevelopmental condition as opposed to a disease or biological disorder. Public discourse tends to focus on inclusion and accommodation rather than a cure. Prevalence data in Africa is sparse due to underdiagnosis and limited research, however, autism is believed to be as common as in other parts of the world. There is generally limited access to formal diagnostic and treatment services with many regions lacking trained Mental Health professionals. In East Asia, studies indicate that autism diagnosis are increasing although exact prevalence rates vary. Research in South Korea showed rising awareness and identification, yet cultural stigma continues to delay diagnosis and treatment. There is also a growing trend towards integrating conventional medical approaches with culturally sensitive holistic practices (Grinker and Cho, 2013).

Working on this collaborative global map class project gave me the “big picture” and an ability to visualize mental health experiences from the global perspective. There are many shared commonalities, as well as a wide variety of differences across various cultures and geographic areas. For instance, this map has shown that depression is a universal challenge, but the ways that it is perceived and treated change significantly across cultures. Common challenges such as stigma, insufficient resources and inequitable access to care appear to remain universal issues. Seeing the overlap in similarities highlights the importance of adopting a biopsychosocial approach to mental health care that addresses the social, cultural and economic contexts that factor into the individual experience. This project has also reinforced for me the idea that promoting Global Mental Health requires creating and maintaining culturally sensitive policies so as to respect a wide variety of differences in beliefs and traditions across our planet.

This visual representation of mental health across the globe showed me that lesser developed countries rely more on

community, family support, and spiritual healing practices as opposed to the West, which primarily relies on evidence-based interventions such as psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy. The Western ignoring of sociocultural dynamics was addressed in Good's work (1997). After gaining a deeper appreciation for the diverse experiences of humans struggling with their mental and emotional wellbeing I have come to the conclusion that the best approach would be to combine both West and East, individualistic and collective perspectives - to use both evidence based and community and social based supports - into a single global action. This was discussed by Kieling et al. (2011) and also in Honwana's work, who centered indigenous perspectives (1997).

Exploring mental health in regions such as Palestine and North Korea showed the significant role that social, political, and economic factors can play in access to mental health care. In war-torn regions this access is extremely limited due to ongoing violence, infrastructural challenges, and social stigma. In places like North Korea where mental illness is heavily stigmatized as weakness, individuals suffer without support. This collaborative map project outlined how areas burdened by limited resources and political instability experience extreme challenges related to mental health care treatment and public awareness. It also showed that even in more affluent countries such as Norway and Sweden, where universal healthcare and routine screenings are available, effective mental health treatment is not universally accessible. Marginalized groups still face additional barriers as it relates to cultural misunderstandings when it comes to seeking help and care. In Italy, the stigmatization of mental illness has been made worse with an extreme shortage of mental health professionals combined with systemic underinvestment on psychiatric care, which reinforces how socioeconomic factors can worsen the negative impacts a culture has on human mental and emotional health. South Korea's struggle with eating disorders shows how social pressures influence both prevalence and recognition of mental health issues. The common theme underlying all of the interactive learning experiences shared on this map seems to be that while there may be biological factors at play, the social and cultural environments that we live in have a much greater impact on our overall mental health and well-being.

Embracing the Challenge: A Call to Decolonize Psychiatry and Restore Relational Humanity

Western Psychiatry Reframed as a
Eugenic Form of Social Control

Abstract:

This discussion essay was originally written as an assignment for a Cross-Cultural Anthropology course taken at Washington State University in Vancouver under the instruction of Scholarly Associate Professor Bonnie Hewlett, PhD, R.N. The following paper summarizes initial findings from a group project in the WSU-V Behavioral Disorders of Children and Adolescents (PSYCH 464) class overseen by Associate Professor Jessica Fales, PhD. Undergraduate students Lindsey Valenzuela, Robert Grant, Kaylee Coats, and Isha Snow are currently researching autism spectrum disorder in Dr. Fales' class using a cross-cultural perspective to analyze different ways that ASD is experienced globally, then assess any world-wide commonalities. The most important finding their preliminary research uncovered is an emergent need for Western psychiatry to adopt biopsychosocial models incorporating social aspects into all diagnostic measures and treatment modalities. The group project included 143 total sources in their initial literature search, with 22 referencing Asia, 26 from Africa, 25 from the Middle East and Europe, and 15 US-focused contextual cited references. The attached abbreviated annotated bibliography analyzed a total of 8 sources; 6 country specific studies, 1 global review across 50+ countries, and 1 general psychosocial meta-analysis made for specific global applications. A total of at least 55 countries is covered by this annotated bibliography which includes thematic evidence relevant to others. 5 out of the 8 sources in the bibliography alone (62.5%) cited difficulty transferring Western diagnostic tools or treatment modalities to other cultures, which is strong evidence that Western models lack cultural fit in language, belief system, and delivery structure. 7 out of the 8 sources cited (87.5%) mentioned either the patient or family experiencing social challenges, such as stigma, exclusion,

or burden, meaning social challenges which are experienced universally across the globe are more disabling than the condition itself. Western ASD care models which use judgement as a tool to label and categorize an individual with the ultimate goal of normalizing or assimilating them are seen as isolationist and meaningless in collectivist cultures, who view behavior as relational in nature and respond to behavior somatically and communally. This discussion essay is a powerful, deeply interdisciplinary manifesto that moves seamlessly between academic insight, systemic critique, cultural reflection, and personal narrative. The PSYCH 464 ASD group's collected data samples, supporting history, and recent news articles are all used as direct evidence for the Western ego existing as an individual trauma response, shaped through structural and systemic coercion.

Keywords:

Decolonizing psychiatry; autism spectrum disorder (ASD); cultural psychiatry; relational healing; biopsychosocial model; epistemological violence; trauma-informed care; cross-cultural psychology; Western individualism; social control; diagnostic systems; neurodivergence; attachment theory; generational trauma; disability justice.

Thesis:

A basic understanding of colonization regards the imposition of an ego-based, individualistic identity structure onto collectivist, relational societies, transforming fluid, interconnected self-concepts into rigid, bounded "selves" where the "I" becomes both a survival strategy and a tool of control. Studying behavioral disorders and mental health across cultures provides a clearer understanding of how the ego, a once flexible aspect of human psychology, becomes a fortress imprisoning people stripped of their connections to the land and each other. Anthropologists can use this data to provide an account of the epistemological violence and relational rupture at the root of colonization, creating a roadmap back to relational wisdom and the opportunity for collective change.

Consider a metaphor of a sick tree as opposed to a sick forest. According to Western psychology, when a tree looks sick, we would study the tree and analyze its bark, leaves, and roots before giving it a diagnosis of a fungus, disease, or rot. Then we would treat the tree in isolation.

Cultures outside the West first ask, what's happening to the forest? Collectivist societies respond to the poisoned soil, drought, invasive species, or even how nearby trees crowd or fail to support it. In this view, the tree (or an individual's behavior) is not an isolated occurrence, but part of a larger system. Behavior is collectively seen as the signal that the system is imbalanced. Prior to colonization, cultures understood behavior as emergent and arising from relationships between people, land, ancestors, community, events, objects. Nothing exists in isolation, everything is interdependently and systemically connected in ecological balance. In this worldview, suffering is not a personal defect but a signal that something is out of balance and in need of attunement within the community. Healing means restoring harmony, with everyone sharing responsibility, not just the person suffering. Colonization severed these ancestral roots, using institutions like the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in our modern day, or American Indian boarding schools and mental institutions more historically, to abstract the individual from the collective, re-framing what is relational distress falsely as an individual disorder by gaslighting individuals and entire societies into accepting personal pathology as soon as their remembrance of ancestral and ecological connection had been severed. This binary has been previously explored by Priya Raghavan in regards to feminist theory (2023) but can be extended deeper, exposed as the root of all social inequities and injustices. This isn't just about psychology, it's about control. Because when people lose the memories that they are each other's medicine to begin with, they then become easier to corrupt, isolate, pathologize, and manage.

The first and most crucial step to decolonizing oneself is not intellectual, it's relational. It begins with unlearning judgment around behavior specifically, and relearning attunement with each other. Colonial systems didn't just take indigenous land, they severed the people from their relational wisdom, replacing interdependence with individualism and attunement with categorization, labels, and stigmatization. Some historians state that divide and conquer is the oldest war strategy in history and the foundation of the APA is built upon this very idea; in a relational framework based on Western pathology, when someone is experiencing a crisis or is in distress the question becomes "what is their diagnosis?" or "how does this person need to be managed?" In a decolonial, relational framework the question shifts to "what unspoken and unmet need is this

behavior communicating?” “What from their past has contributed to this?” “How has the community and system contributed to this?” “What does this person need, not what do they deserve?” Decolonizing begins with listening beyond language and responding with curiosity, not fear or control. Attunement is a conscious response instead of an unconscious reaction, it is being able to feel with someone not just analyze or judge them. This method of healing fractured nervous systems used in cultures outside of the West replaces pathologizing with relational presence. This first crucial step to deconstructing colonial culture has been profoundly ignored and missed by modern decolonization movements, which typically center on material restitution such as land, policy and sovereignty without equally addressing the psychological rupture and act of relational violence that defines colonizer tactics. What good is land sovereignty if we are reproducing the Western systems of punishment and exclusion on that land? And what good is reclaiming our ancestral practices if we haven't unlearned pathologizing distress instead of attuning to it? How can we possibly give the land back when we haven't even given each other back to ourselves? When we are taught to judge, classify, and dominate each other, we diagnose each other reflexively even in activist spaces that are geared towards social justice. People refer to each other as being toxic, manipulative, or tell each other that they need therapy. Unable to cognitively step outside of the box that Western cognition has put us in, we are no longer able to understand that true decolonization means restoring our emotional landscape and the capacity to hold our grief, rage, confusion and contradiction relationally with each other without rejecting or isolating. Until we collectively prioritize relational attunement and co-regulation alongside repair in direct opposition to practicing judgment, separation and division, we risk rebuilding coloniality and repeating history yet again. The cross-cultural studies and collected research that this PSYCH 464 group gathered for global analysis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) offers conclusive and direct evidence of Western Psychiatry still actively being used in outside countries as a tool of social control, dehumanizing understandings of development, distress and differences. This has already been done in the United States; the lectures from Professor Fales' PSYCH 464 class state repeatedly in reference to textbook material that disorders are typically seen as deviances from normal, but the lines that the APA draws between normal and abnormal, functional and disordered are entirely arbitrary. Many

professionals feel that we should not label children at all (Mash and Wolfe, 2019).

The arbitrariness of “normal” versus “abnormal” in psychology and psychiatry lies in the fact that there is no objective, natural boundary where healthy functioning suddenly ends and disorder begins. Human behavior, emotion, and cognition exist on a spectrum. For example, sadness shades into depression, focus shades into ADHD, and shyness shades into social anxiety, yet at what point one becomes a “disorder” is determined by committees (such as those at the APA) rather than by an absolute biological marker. These distinctions are therefore shaped by cultural norms, values, and expectations about what is considered tolerable or functional.

Lines are drawn “here” and not “there” because institutions need categories to make diagnoses billable, to organize research, and to standardize treatment. The decision about where to draw the line often comes from consensus rather than discovery; what experts agree is the best threshold, not what science proves is a natural division. This consensus becomes “universally agreed upon” because professional communities and systems (insurance, education, law) adopt these categories, reinforcing their legitimacy.

What is gained from this arbitrariness is, on one hand, utility: having categories allows professionals to communicate, design treatments, and allocate resources. But on the other hand, it also reinforces systems of control and normalization: labeling children and adults as “disordered” can stigmatize difference, enforce conformity, and align with institutional interests (e.g., pharmaceutical markets, school funding models). Thus, arbitrariness is both functional and political because it simplifies human complexity in ways that are useful for systems but not always accurate or compassionate for individuals.

Problems pathologized in the DSM are simply difficulties adapting to a specific cultural worldview that values hierarchy, individualism, and control; under a trauma informed lens, pathologies such as behavioral disorders or mood disorders become understandable behavioral reactions to living in an abusive system (Beutler & Malik, 2004). By viewing the difficulties that collectivist cultures have transitioning to individualistic

frameworks, we can observe how the APA's tools were created to be weaponized and justify socioeconomic stratification, defining the poor and marginalized as mentally or morally inferior and creating the frameworks that ensure they remain that way. We can also create a map back to what the West has lost culturally post-colonization by analyzing the values of collectivist cultures that are currently in direct conflict with Western-centric norms.

Non-Western cultural views of behavior being deeply embedded in a web of relationships exist in stark contrast to Western psychology's pathologizing of individuals, which demonstrates how the American Psychological Association employs methods not just as tools, but as expressions of a specific cultural worldview that prizes hierarchy, individualism, and control. This contradicts the values of more collectivist societies, who have family-based identities, community defined norms, and shared caregiving responsibilities. Failing to recognize the relational and communal frameworks that define disability in collectivist cultures accounts for the difficulties in adopting Western modalities to other countries' mental health systems. Societies not built on individualism or capitalist productivity metrics reject sorting systems as dehumanizing, and their instincts are correct in doing so because Western psychiatry has typically been used as a means of social control. The APA and DSM have clearly been weaponized in our own culture to discipline the poor and to justify racial hierarchies, and the APA has even admitted this publicly themselves on multiple occasions (APA, 2021; APA Monitor, 2022; Cummings Center for the History of Psychology, 2021).

Several societies have historically resisted or outright rejected sorting systems that reduce people to categories of "normal" and "disordered," particularly because their social fabric is not built on individualism or capitalist productivity metrics:

- Ojibwe/Anishinaabe (North America): Mental and emotional differences are understood relationally, often interpreted through roles, dreams, or spiritual experiences, not as fixed pathologies. Healing focuses on restoring balance within the community and with the land.
- Maori (Aotearoa/New Zealand): The Māori worldview (hauora) emphasizes collective well-being, spiritual health, and

ancestral continuity. Health is relational, not compartmentalized, and sorting systems that stigmatize individuals are seen as culturally destructive.

- Akan (Ghana): Identity is rooted in clan and lineage; differences in behavior are often attributed to spiritual imbalance or relational disharmony rather than “disorder.” Care is oriented around family and ritual practices.
- Tibetan Buddhist communities (Tibet/Nepal): Experiences that Western psychiatry might classify as psychosis or mania are often framed as signs of spiritual initiation or karmic imbalance, treated through meditation, ritual, and community support.
- Ubuntu-based communities (Southern Africa): The Ubuntu philosophy (“I am because we are”) views individuals as inseparable from community. Distress is interpreted as a collective concern, not as a personal defect, and solutions prioritize relational repair.

These examples show that in relational, land-based, or spiritual worldviews, difference is not pathologized as deviation from “normal” but understood as part of the human condition and addressed through collective healing. The modern Western perception of narcissism is an excellent example of how the APA has used the DSM to decontextualize behavior and weaponized diagnosis as a tool of social control, both to keep citizens behaviorally in line and to further separate and divide individuals from each other through fear. Psychoanalysts like Freud originally understood narcissism as a developmental phase and an adaptive defense, but Western Psychiatry has recently reframed narcissism as a fixed personality disorder, which isolates the diagnosis from its historical context. This shift reflects a broader colonial agenda of Western mental health systems: turning relational wounds into moral failings, and pathologizing traits that might disrupt individualist norms. When the term narcissist is used casually and punitively today particularly on social media and in pop culture, it reinforces the moral binary of toxic versus acceptable, and encourages the emotional abandonment of traumatized individuals rather than offering them attuned support. Narcissistic traits often emerge from early childhood neglect, particularly in cultures that reward dominance, suppress their emotions, and punish emotional vulnerability. Discarding individuals who are suffering indicates dehumanization and

a profound lack of empathy. Through this lens, we can see that Western culture is itself profoundly narcissistic, and prioritizes its own image over authenticity. Viewing individual behavior through a relational decolonized framework reveals that what is frequently labeled as narcissism is a survival strategy in a system that fails to offer emotional security to its members (Shrive and Taylor, 2023).

As a tool of colonial social control, the Western psychiatric model systemically removes behavior from its relational and cultural context intentionally, to create the illusion that the problem is solely within the individual and not in the family, community, or system. This is particularly clear in the DSM, which is essentially a list of symptoms that disconnect emotional distress from the context they arise in. The Western diagnostic gaze sees what is wrong rather than what happened, creating a deficit model of judgment and stigma with the purpose of achieving social control. In theory, a social contract is about trading some freedom for collective safety and agreeing to be protected by the same laws and benefits, but that promise only works when everyone is valued equally. The idea that freedom must be exchanged for safety comes from Western social contract theorists like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. They assumed that in a “state of nature,” people’s unrestrained freedom would inevitably lead to conflict, violence, and insecurity. To avoid this, individuals supposedly agreed to give up certain liberties, like the freedom to harm others, in exchange for the protection of laws and government. But this framing already rests on particular cultural assumptions: that humans are naturally competitive, that conflict is inevitable, and that order requires centralized authority.

Other cultural frameworks suggest the trade-off is not necessary. Many Indigenous societies, for instance, have shown that freedom and safety can coexist when communities are bound together by kinship, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility rather than coercive laws. In such systems, safety is not something bought by sacrificing freedom, but something generated through trust, relationship, and shared values. The assumption that freedom and safety must be in tension reflects a worldview shaped by fear, scarcity, and hierarchy, not an inevitable truth about human society. So the “exchange” idea persists because it benefits centralized states: it justifies limiting freedoms in order to preserve authority.

But it is not the only model; societies can and have built forms of safety that expand, rather than restrict, human freedom

The modern social contract is not designed to foster belonging but to manage risk, because the dominant system fears unpredictability, fears emotional expression, and fears relational power; instead of building trust it creates a system built on behavioral control. Compliance is the end goal of the Western social contract, because a regulated population is easier to control and manipulate than a healed population capable of regulating itself through communal attunement. The Western social contract itself is clearly abusive, therefore adapting Western psychiatric methods to outside cultures should be seen as a form of systemic violence against all of humanity through the forced assimilation of corrupt values and norms. Extending that logic inward, the use of the APA's methods and frameworks on our own members of the American public should be seen as a form of domestic terrorism. Psychology historically speaking has been a more than willing accomplice in white supremacist policies, including forced sterilizations, intelligence testing as racial hierarchy, and segregationist treatments. The APA's 2021 Apology confirms this legacy; this is not conspiracy, it's public record. "APA acknowledges that it failed in its role leading the discipline of psychology, was complicit in contributing to systemic inequities, and hurt many through racism, racial discrimination, and denigration of communities of color, thereby falling short on its mission to benefit society and improve lives."

Non-conformity is pathologized in the West and resistance is medicalized, with institutions put in place to punish any outliers whose behaviors challenge the status quo and disrupt the social order. Because everyone is not valued equally, the social contract does not ensure collective safety; because it cannot offer us relational security, it has violated its own terms, meaning we are no longer obligated to follow it and can create our own. The nervous system of a society cannot regulate itself through fear, it can only regulate through trust. What would a social contract look like where the goal was not behavioral sameness and compliance, but relational resilience and coherence? Identity is something that exists in relationship to others and is defined in context to the community it belongs to. Other examples of things that exist relationally and in context to community are a sense of belonging, responsibility, respect or honor, language and meaning, and perhaps most significantly for

Western culture, grief. How grief is felt and expressed is deeply influenced by cultural context. It is worth philosophically contemplating how much the Western world has lost after colonization homogenized the planet into individual conformers and performers for the system, and it's also worth noting how Western colonizers likely aren't even aware of what they have lost due to their ancestral relational skills eroding and no longer being in modern use. We can see similar patterns today in how due to technology humanity is now forgetting how to write; around 40 percent of Gen Z has lost its handwriting capabilities, according to a study from the University of Stavanger (Foster, 2025).

Raising awareness among Western colonizers about the loss of ancestral relational skills requires more than intellectual critique; it calls for embodied and communal experiences that reawaken connection. Practices like community gardening, foraging, or land-based rituals help people feel interdependence with the earth, while storytelling and ancestral folklore remind them that their own lineages once lived relationally. Exploring languages that embed kinship and animacy can shift thought patterns away from isolated subjectivity, and trauma-informed group practices like restorative circles can model safety and belonging in community. Paired with critical education on how psychology, religion, and law eroded relational knowledge through assimilation, these approaches frame the issue not only as harm to colonized peoples but also as a deep impoverishment of the colonizers' humanity. Awareness emerges most powerfully when people not only learn what was lost, but also feel the richness of living in connection.

Should the West and the APA want to learn from these cross-cultural examples and the evidence of the collectivist resistance to and rejection of Western-centric psychiatric models that this group gathered on global ASD, they would find many valuable lessons. Just as African and Asian scholars adapted models to fit their own cultures, Western systems must learn from these adaptations to create more inclusive, trauma-informed, and relationally grounded services at home. Community-based care models like the World Health Organization's CST program have far greater success than individual focused therapeutic regimes. The success of parent-led, culturally adopted low-cost interventions in the Global South demonstrates potential to decentralize Autism care in the West too, especially in underserved communities. Difficulties with transferring

Western modalities in Asia indicate that caregiver stress, sibling impacts and cultural values cannot be neglected. Interventions must include family dynamics and contextually look at the systems that surround the individual. Redefining disability through a relational lens would create diagnoses that are not only a set of traits but also accepted valid experiences. Most importantly, the APA should emphasize adaptability over standardization, refitting diagnostic and treatment models to be fluid and contextual rather than rigid protocols. Difficulties that other cultures have had in adopting Western-centric frameworks point directly to Western psychiatry's origins in perpetuating systemic injustices and inequalities and demonstrate exactly why and how psychology was originally created to break individuals into separate, unrelated and disconnected units. By removing our ability to understand behavior relationally and replacing it with a social contract based on compliance and control, Western culture is engaging in ongoing epistemological colonization; a stripping of the relational, intersubjective meaning of what it means to be human. Western Psychiatry needs to acknowledge its own cultural biases, especially in framing neurodivergence as deficit rather than difference, and it must combat its own pathologizing publicly with cultural humility. Carma Corcoran provides one example for a decolonized and trauma informed theory of wellness and recovery that the APA could adopt in her book *The Incarceration of Native American Women: Creating Pathways to Wellness and Recovery through Gentle Action Theory*. Gentle Action Theory (Corcoran, 2023) correlates with tenants of traditional ways of knowing and being. The research from Somali, Nigerian, Setswana, and South Africa highlights the damage of stripping away cultural and communal frameworks.

Will the West learn? Tina Lindhard previously correlated the developmental relationship between systems, layers, structures, levels of consciousness, and Freud's model of the mind. (2020). A PowerPoint presentation providing expanded insights of similar ideas that uses a meta framework of systems theories is posted publicly on YouTube (Snow, 2025). These patterns have repeated throughout history for Millennia (please refer to the attached chart below), but are also not ancient history. The APA continues to be used by the United States government as a tool of social control. The American Psychological Association publicly acknowledged its historical role in perpetuating systemic racism

and in supporting eugenic theories (2021) when it issued a formal apology to communities of color. The APA's Monitor (2022) additionally published a special report outlining past wrongs. Both of these statements were informed by a comprehensive historical review which was conducted by the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron (2021), detailing the APA's involvement in eugenic theories and segregationist policies.

The APA's 2021 apology and subsequent 2022 Monitor report make clear that psychology as a discipline was deeply entangled with the eugenics movement, which sought to "improve" human populations through selective breeding, sterilization, and the elimination of those deemed "unfit." Many early psychologists promoted and legitimized eugenic ideas by developing intelligence tests that were used to rank races and justify segregation, immigration restrictions, and forced sterilizations of people with disabilities and people of color. Hans Asperger, whose name during Nazi-era Germany was used to designate the "higher functioning" category of autistics that might still be useful for employment and labor purposes, had clear and well documented ties to eugenic movements and ideologies. By positioning itself as a science of human difference, psychology provided the language and tools that allowed eugenics to appear objective and rational rather than ideological. In this way, the APA's complicity lay not only in silence but in actively advancing theories that pathologized entire communities. The link between psychology and eugenics demonstrates how arbitrary definitions of "normal" and "abnormal" were weaponized as instruments of social control, embedding systemic racism into both policy and practice.

One year ago, the APA published an article that discussed how it would be standing firm against the government's escalating assaults on equity, diversity, inclusion (APA, 2024), but recently the New York Times published an article titled "Under Pressure, Psychology Accreditation Board Suspends Diversity Standards" (Barry, 2025). This concession by the APA is particularly alarming because it made such a public show of combating racism in recent years due to its history of eugenics. These actions tell a clear story, one where as soon as the current political party in power supported eugenics, the APA reverted its stance.

In his book *History Below the Global*, author Lorenzo Kamel (2024) examined the coloniality of power and offers a view on pre-colonial perspectives, as well as the process through which indigenous histories became swallowed up by European colonizing forces. He wrote that the first recorded war in human history took place around 2450 BCE in ancient Mesopotamia, triggered by competition around water sources, and estimated that the last war on our planet will start for the same reasons. Healing collective scarcity trauma and reviving ancestral knowledge of relational attunement is clearly imperative not only for resolving the current mental health crisis, but also for continued survival as a species. Because the social contract is being used as a tool of coercive control forcing citizens into behavioral compliance, it causes colonized citizens to march each other blindly towards a quickly approaching extinction date. Removing behavioral context from humanity's perceptual awareness and losing abilities to relationally attune reproduces Western systems of punishment and exclusion and forces compliance in our own relationship dynamics.

Raised in a lower middle income, high conflict household in the United States, my own parents mirrored authoritarian tactics of our government in the family home. My parents did not manage emotions well; their volatility acted as a form of behavioral control. The withholding of love combined with neglect was a powerful teaching tool, but rather than teach me self-control or how to manage my emotions, my parents taught me that love and safety are conditional and their approval must be earned. I was kicked out a total of 8 times at least beginning when I was 12 years old, and when I was 16, my mother pulled a gun on me. At one point I was forcibly committed on a psych ward by my mother after a suicide attempt, but given the lack of love and genuine care in my home, who wouldn't be depressed? An absence of safe adults and healthy mentors resulted in significant behavior issues in adolescence. In place of understanding these behaviors in response to lack of attunement and arising due to lacking the language to communicate unmet needs, my parents personalized my behavior and began kicking me out of their homes when I was 12 years old. Sharing the diagnosis of autism obtained in adulthood I expected understanding and sympathy, but was ridiculed and shunned. It has taken years of healing to realize they were acting out aspects of Western culture in our family system such as pathologizing the behaviors

of children and not being attuned to their needs. This closing personal account provides further anecdotal evidence for generational trauma being defined as a lack of caregiver attunement. This is not atypical or unusual for citizens of the United States in lower and middle classes (Vincent, 2001; Ball, 2003; Pearce, 2004; Hartas, 2014; Vincent and Maxwell, 2015; Wilson and Worsley, 2021). I have also conducted my own qualitative and quantitative research on this topic in *Western Parenting Impacts...*, providing a clear correlation between attachment theory and family communication patterns theory in an extensively researched paper (Snow, 2024). Experiencing childhood in an unattuned and dysregulated family system launched me into the adult world emotionally volatile with domineering high conflict communication patterns.

Cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures by understanding and respecting their beliefs, values, and behaviors, while also being aware of and adapting one's own worldview and potential biases. It involves a combination of positive attitudes, policies, and behaviors, and requires active learning, self-reflection, and a willingness to ask questions and listen to diverse perspectives. Limited cultural competency and what Annette Lareau referred to as lack of “accomplishment of natural growth” (2003) caused me to experience repeated social rejections, further abandonment from peers, limited social mobility and several abusive relationships. As a mother with a chronically dysregulated nervous system, I later perpetuated many of the same traumas onto my children. My oldest son spent most of his teenage years in residential care because I lacked awareness and attunement abilities. He has paid the price throughout his life trajectory like I did after being rejected by my parents because they didn't know what attunement was. Leaving my last marriage five years ago marked a turning point where I became determined to understand, at the deepest level, what abuse really is: how it operates, how it affects the nervous system, and how it becomes normalized in relationships. For much of my life, I had carried the effects of a traumatic childhood and then repeated those patterns in adulthood without fully realizing it. Walking away from that marriage was not only an act of survival, but also the beginning of a conscious decision to break the cycle of trauma. I wanted to name the dynamics that had shaped me, to recover the parts of myself that had been silenced, and to build a new foundation

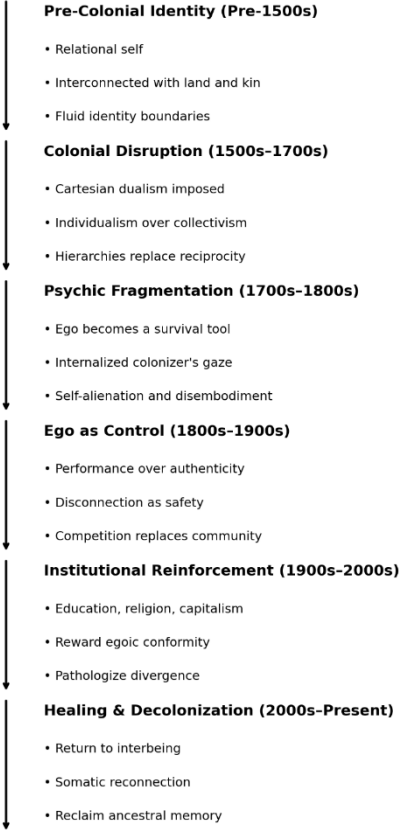
of awareness and healing. This commitment to learning and recovery became the motivation that eventually brought me back to college, where I began to study these issues with the intention of helping others recognize and avoid the same patterns.

Motivated to help others avoid what I am going through, I went back to college two years ago and studied this topic extensively. My two youngest sons had significant behavior problems at school, and after practicing attunement using techniques which were effective in my own trauma recovery, when I was given custody of them by the courts I saw a complete shift in both their behavior and our relationship. I have had my heart shattered on numerous occasions, have been mistreated or left by everyone I have ever loved, and I struggle every day with a damaged nervous system that is desperately seeking relational attunement. Colonialism and authoritarianism are psychosocial patterns and trauma responses scaled to societal systems, repeating for millennia in an ouroboros loop that is attempting to resolve itself recursively.

Historical Timelines:

The chart below was generated for illustrative purposes, and provides a crucial understanding of history as a closed feedback time loop and form of systemic repetition compulsion caused by the unhealed trauma resulting from humanity's collective ruptured relational attunement, as discussed in this essay (OpenAI, 2025).

Colonization and the Formation of the Ego



Embracing the Challenge: Annotated Bibliography

Written by Lindsey Valenzuela, Robert Grant, Kaylee Coats, Isha Snow

Bello-Mojeed M, Ani C, Lagunju I, Omigbodun O. Feasibility of parent-mediated behavioural intervention for behavioural problems in children with autism spectrum disorder in Nigeria: a pilot study. *Child Adolesc Psychiatry Ment Health*. 2016 Sep 2;10(1):28. doi: 10.1186/s13034-016-0117-4. PMID: 27594900; PMCID: PMC5010684.

This study examines the gap between behavioral intervention services for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in sub-Saharan Africa. By conducting a pre-post pilot intervention study, the researchers used a sample of 20 mothers of children aged 3 to 17 diagnosed with ASD. They led them through five weekly group sessions of parent-mediated behavioral intervention headed by a licensed psychiatrist. Researchers used the Aggression and Self-injury Questionnaire (ASIQ), Knowledge of Behavioral Management Questionnaire (KBMAQ), and Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) before and after the behavioral interventions to monitor changes. After the intervention, the researcher found that aggression and self-injurious behavior in the children significantly decreased, whilst maternal knowledge of behavioral management greatly improved. This study shows the value of utilizing at-home behavioral intervention strategies, especially in areas with restricted access to resources.

Psychiatrists Dr. Mashudat Bello-Mojeed, Dr.Cornelius Ani, Dr.Ike Lagunju, and Dr.Olayinka Omigbodun from Nigeria authored this study, which was published in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* (2016), a peer-reviewed journal. In terms of credibility, this study has been cited 67 times by other scholarly articles, and its strengths include a clear and replicable intervention protocol and culturally adapted materials. It also addresses an important service gap. However, there is no control group to rule out placebos, and it relies on parent-reported

outcomes, which could create potential bias. The findings are consistent with international studies on parent-led interventions and show the adaptability at-home interventions can provide. This source provides valuable insight into ways to mitigate service gaps in areas with little to no access to ASD services. Creating programs designed to teach caregivers the tools to succeed is incredibly beneficial and should be a top priority. However, the study does encompass some weaknesses such as having a small sample size of caregivers ($N = 20$), only recruiting mothers, and only representing a small geographic area. It might have been better to include caregivers across the spectrum such as fathers, grandparents, etc. All of these factors can reduce generalizability and must be considered in the context of the study findings.

Despite some weaknesses, the present study provides valuable findings to the literature on cross-cultures perspectives of interventions for ASD and is relevant to our project because it highlights ways to improve treatment deficits in a way that transcends cross-cultural boundaries. The researchers had careful cultural consideration throughout their work, which is a staple of other cross-cultural ASD research in the literature.

Duale, H.A. & Gele, A. (2024). Exploring knowledge of autism, its causes and treatment among immigrant and nonimmigrant parents in Somalia/Somaliland. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 18(22). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-024-00713-3>.

This study focuses on the perspectives of Somali parents of children diagnosed with ASD. Despite the general belief in the Somali population that ASD is a ‘Western disease’, it appears that it is actually quite common among Somali, perhaps due to the tradition of consanguineous marriage, which is known to increase genetic risk. Researchers conducted 22 in-depth interviews with parents who sent their children to the two main centers in Somalia providing care and education for children with developmental disabilities. The sample included 20 mothers, 1 father, and 1 grandmother; the interviews were analyzed via thematic analysis. Five main themes were identified among parents’ experiences:

1. Autism is an unfamiliar term in Somalia, often referred to with derogatory language instead.

2. Diverse attribution of causes-Parents commonly cited the MMR vaccine, pregnancy-related issues, and magical/religious theories such as the idea of divine punishment.

3. Treatments-Many parents felt their child's ASD was curable and thus sought largely ineffective biomedical treatments. Praying over the child with the Qu'ran, occasionally combined with more extreme practices meant to exorcise evil spirits, was also used.

4. Discrimination and stigma-Parents stated that both themselves and their children were ostracized and ridiculed in the community, with other parents keeping their children away from the child with ASD for fear their normally developing children could 'catch' the disorder.

5. Unmet needs-The lack of public and professional awareness leaves parents sorely lacking for community resources.

This report was authored by two researchers. Dr. Hodan A. Duale is a medical doctor and public health research scientist with expertise in maternal and pediatric healthcare. She is currently employed at the Department of Maternal and Child Health of the Somali Institute for Health Research (SIHR) in Hargeisa, Somaliland. Dr. Abdi Gele is a PhD in epidemiology and professor at the School of Public Health and Research at the Somali National University. He is a research scientist in maternal and child health, public health issues, and epidemiology. He is also currently working with the SIHR in their Department of Maternal and Child Health in connection with this research project. The study was published in the *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health Journal*, open-source international journal publishing research on child and adolescent mental health cross-culturally. Unfortunately, I was not able to find a specific number of times this work has been cited. This work provides in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of Somali parents, cross-checked by multiple professionals. However, the sample is small (N=22) and culturally specific, limiting its generalizability. However, the results are consistent with other literature regarding perceptions of ASD in African countries, particularly in regards to supernatural beliefs about its causes.

This source corroborates the cultural perceptions of ASD described in other works about ASD in Africa, as well as contributing some insight

into how people with ASD are treated in these communities. It answers our research question by addressing sociocultural perspectives on ASD in the African context through the words of the people themselves, directly.

Divan, G., Bhavnani, S., Leadbitter, K., Ellis, C., Dashupta, J., Abubakar, A., Elsabbagh, M., Hamdani, S. U., Servili, C., Patel, V., & Green, J. (2021). Annual Research review: Achieving universal health coverage for young children with autism spectrum disorder in low- and middle-income countries: a review of reviews. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 62(5), 514-535.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13404>

This study conducted a meta-analysis review on 31 previous reviews that covered over 50 countries across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia in order to identify the barriers that keep children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from receiving universal health care coverage in low- and middle-income countries. The review specifically looked at four separate domains: social and family experience, detection and diagnosis, access to interventions, and policy and legislation.

A systematic literature search was conducted through four different databases, Cochrane Database of Systematic reviews, APA PsycInfo, Ovid Medline, and EMBASE and screening them for relevance. After gathering enough data, the researchers found that stigma, unscalable care models, and diagnostic tools that are not culturally appropriate were the major barriers. Improving public awareness of developmental milestones was emphasized as a key strategy to help support intervention efforts. Because this paper pushes back against a one size fits-all Western dominated model of autism care by addressing how cultural context, stigma, healthcare infrastructure, and policy environments influence outcomes, it strongly supports our thesis statement. The findings show that children with autism face systemic exclusion due to the stigma within families and communities as well as diagnostic tools that do not reflect local norms and care models that cannot be scaled to low resource settings. The authors propose a “Theory of Change” framework that assists in designing community led, sustainable and inclusive interventions.

In terms of credibility, this paper has been cited 87 times according to Google Scholar. The authors are credible and respected members of their fields. Their affiliations include Harvard Medical School and the World Health Organization. Using findings from over 50 countries and 31 reviews, this study is one of the most comprehensive analyses of ASD service gaps in underprivileged or underdeveloped countries. The authors provided a structured framework called the Theory of Change to assist in development of new policy and programs. However, no meta-analysis of the accumulated data was included in this report.

These findings align with other existing literature on the subject, which emphasize a need for culturally adopted, community-based ASD interventions in countries with limited resources. This source directly applies to understanding the systemic barriers as well as potential systemic solutions for ASD care in countries with low resources. This supports our research objectives because it identifies diagnostic challenges and scalable intervention models in non-Western societies. The review's emphasis on community-based care, cultural adoption, and policy alignment make this article relevant to discussions on both Global Public Health and cross-cultural Autism research.

Hajri M, Abbes Z, Ben Yahia H, Boudali M, Bouden A, Mrabet A, Amado I. Cognitive remediation therapy in autism spectrum disorder: Tunisian experience. *Tunis Med.* 2019 Jun;97(6):795-801. PMID: 31872411.

This study looks to explore the effectiveness of Cognitive Remediation Therapy (CRT), which is designed to improve executive function and academic outcomes for children and adolescents diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Tunisia of North Africa. CRT targets executive functioning with guided exercises based on the principle of neuroplasticity, which refers to the brain's ability to change in response to personal experiences or environmental changes. To test this, researchers used a cross-sectional research design with pre and post-test assessments on a sample of 24 participants ($n = 24$) aged 6-21 all diagnosed with ASD per criteria found in the DSM-V. Researchers designed the treatment assessments to evaluate intelligence using Raven's CPM, verbal fluency (semantic and phonetic), working memory with digit spans, and academic performance through grades earned in school. Over the

course of the study, the post-test assessments revealed that improvements were made in all four measures. Intelligence increased on the CPM scores, Phonetic fluency and animal category improved, forward and backward digit span improved, and grades improved significantly post treatment. These results suggest that CRT is a promising and effective intervention for improving executive functioning and academic outcomes in children and adolescents diagnosed with ASD.

This article is authored by Malek Hajri, Zeineb Abbes, Houda Ben Yahia, Mariem Boudal, Asma Bouden, Ali Mrabe, and Sabelle Amado and published in *La Tunisie Médicale* (2019). A team from Hôpital Razi and Université Tunis El Manar, in collaboration with international partners from France, conducted this study. In terms of credibility, this article has been cited six times according to Google Scholar. Strengths of this study include the broad spectrum of outcomes, individualized therapy, and CRT is clearly defined with care to cultural adaptiveness. The weaknesses include a small sample size; the study began with 24, but only 16 participants actually completed the program. Increasing the sample size would increase the validity of the results, and a short follow up window, not allowing the opportunity to test for sustained consistency.

The researchers offer valuable insight into how Cognitive Remediation Therapy can improve executive function and academic outcomes in children and adolescents diagnosed with ASD. This study is relevant to our project because it adds to the general literature on treatment options used to improve the daily lives of children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder in non-Western societies. It is essential to gather information on how the various facets of ASD are treated in other cultures as opposed to Western societies in order to obtain a better understanding in the etiology, diagnosis, and treatment of the disorder. Although this study shows promising results, researchers could strengthen the evidence for CRT by conducting studies with larger sample sizes and recruiting participants from more diverse cultural backgrounds.

Kazak, A. E., Schneider, S., Didonato, S., & Pai, A. L. H. (2015). Family psychosocial risk screening guided by the Pediatric Psychosocial Preventative Health Model (PPPHM) using Psychosocial Assessment Tool (PAT). *Acta Oncologica*, 54(5), pgs. 574-580

<https://doi.org/10.3109/0284186X.2014.995774>

This study discusses psychosocial risk factors in context of the negative psychological, emotional and social outcomes due to stigmas related to the child's diagnosis of Autism. Researchers created a preventative health model through many years of interdisciplinary research in pediatric psychology, family systems theory, and health services. They used clinical observations, empirical data, and psychosocial outcomes and then adapted the results for use in assessing and identifying psychosocial experiences and risk factors among children diagnosed with ASD. To accomplish this goal, the researchers developed a Psychosocial Assessment Tool which identifies 3 categories of risk: Low, medium, and high. Families who had ASD diagnosed children had higher risk scores, indicating that stress and limited resources negatively impact them. The PAT screening tool helps detect which families need preventative support. Out of 47 samples from 43 papers across the globe, the main finding was that psychosocial risks consistently follow a 55-34-11 pattern of distribution. 55% of families were low risk, 34% medium risk, and 11% were high risk. These results suggest that there is a consistent pattern of distribution of risk globally amongst children diagnosed with ASD and identifies risk as not just solely about the child diagnosed but the entire family system's well-being and ability to function. This radically shifts ASD care from treating symptoms to prevention and early holistic supports, which is why this model is so significantly impactful. Shifting focus to prevention and holistic support make this model adaptable for use across multiple cultural and economic settings.

In terms of credibility, Google Scholar states that this article has been cited 180 times. This article was published in a peer reviewed journal focusing on cancer research; it is also significant that there are higher risk scores for cancer in the ASD population. The researchers all have backgrounds in pediatric psychology and oncology. A significant weakness in this study is that it suggests integrating somatization into a model for the Asian population, but it doesn't actually describe how to go about doing that. Despite that issue, this remains a strong resource, because the authors used data from multiple countries to create this model, which can be adapted for use in multiple cultures and contexts.

The results are consistent, and reinforce the findings of multiple other studies identifying two main challenges for ASD children: difficulty accessing services and increased stress on families. These are both significant issues that increase ASD risk factors.

This study aligns with our research because it discusses challenges being faced by families of children with ASD across the globe. We chose to review this study in particular because it highlights the importance of developing a universal psychosocial assessment tool that is applicable across cultures.

Nnamani A, Akabogu J, Otu MS, Uloh-Bethels AC, Ukoha E, Iyekekpolor OM, Omile JC, Obiezu MN, Dike AE, Ike CV, Otu FM, Eseadi C. Using rational-emotive language education to improve communication and social skills of adolescents with autism spectrum disorders in Nigeria. *Medicine (Baltimore)*. 2019

Aug;98(31):e16550. doi:

10.1097/MD.00000000000016550. PMID: 31374019; PMCID: PMC6708801.

This study looks to test the effectiveness of Rational-Emotive Language Education (RELE) in improving communication and social skills in adolescents diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Nigeria. Researchers did this by conducting a randomized controlled trial, dividing 68 adolescents diagnosed with ASD into a treatment group (n=33) and a control group (n=35). The treatment group was assigned a 12-week RELE program with two sessions per week. This intervention aimed to replace harmful and limiting beliefs with more rational and helpful ones, similarly to that of cognitive behavioral therapy. Researchers measured communication and social skills using the Autism Communication and Social Skills Scale for Adolescents (ACSSA) through a pretest, post-test, and a 2-month follow-up. Researchers placed the control group on a waitlist and did not provide any RELE treatment, but still measured the group with a pretest, post-test, and a 2-month follow-up. After the course of treatment, it was revealed that at baseline, no significant difference existed between the two groups. However, post-intervention, the

treatment group showed significant improvement in ACSSA scores compared to the control group. These results suggest that Rational-Emotive Language Education (RELE) is an effective and promising intervention in building communication and social skills in adolescents diagnosed with ASD in Nigeria. This is only a significant finding if all of the adolescents expressed self-limiting beliefs prior to the study as a baseline.

This article is authored by Amuche Nnamani, Josephine Akabogu, Mkpoikanke Sunday Otu, Annah C. Uloh-Bethels, Evelyn Ukoha, Olayinka M. Iyekekpolor, Jacinta Chinwe Omile, Maureen Nnenna Obiezu, Anastasia E. Dike, Chioma Vivian Ike, Favour Mkpoikanke Otu, and Chiedu Eseadi and published in *Medicine* (2019). In terms of credibility, the research was conducted by a multidisciplinary team from various Nigerian universities. The strengths of this study lie in its use of a randomized control trial, large effect size with consistent outcomes, a relatively large sample size ($n=68$), and culturally appropriate intervention strategies for low-income areas. Weaknesses of this study include the lack of qualitative data, which would help contextualize the participants' experiences, and the limitation of follow-up being only 2 months. Longitudinal follow-up with participants would provide valuable insight into the acquisition of skills from the RELE program. It is also worth noting that only a small geographic area was sampled for the study.

This source contains valuable insight into how we can improve communication and social engagement through Rational-Emotive Language Education in adolescents diagnosed with ASD living in low-income and low-resource areas. It is relevant to our research topic in that it proposes a promising intervention strategy that can help improve services catered to those with ASD living in non-Western communities.

Melamu, N.J., Tsabedze, W.F., Erasmus, P., Schlebusch, L. (2024). "We call it bokoa jwa tlhaloganyo": Setswana parents' perspective on autism spectrum disorder. *Front. Psychiatry*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpyst.2024.1381160>

This study focuses on Setswana parents' perspectives on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district of South Africa, using qualitative analysis to describe and understand the

experiences of parents who enrolled in a World Health Organization training program for families of children with developmental disabilities. The study included a 3-week caregiver wellbeing module, followed by a 12-week skills training module. A sample of 6 families who participated in the WHO-CST program also agreed to participate in the study by engaging in in-depth interviews regarding their experiences raising a child with ASD. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, then analyzed via thematic analysis.

Several themes characterizing parent experiences were identified within the interviews. In terms of understanding ASD, parents generally were aware of ASD as a neurodevelopmental disorder. In Setswana, it is referred to as 'bokoa jwa tlhaloganyo', a general term loosely translating to 'mental condition'. Parents identified repetitive behaviors, developmental delays, and eating differences as symptoms. These samples placed more emphasis on eating problems than mentioned in Western literature on the subject. Another theme was Indigenous perceptions of ASD. Many communities believe ASD to be caused by supernatural forces (e.g. divine punishment). It was also reported that the parent had contacted a traditional healer or that others in the community had suggested such a 'cure'. Another theme was interaction among families. Several parents cited music as a way of engaging and communicating with their children with ASD. For instance, pairing songs with specific routines, or playing call and answer games to help the child develop language was mentioned. Parents mentioned that they try to create a calm and friendly atmosphere for their children to function in. The final theme identified was symptoms of ASD. Before age 2, eating differences was a common feature parents noticed early on, in addition to missed developmental milestones, social disinterest, and fixed interests. Parents reported feeling that something just wasn't "right" with their child, even when local physicians reassured them. Overall, ASD is highly stigmatized in African countries and South Africa is no exception.

The authors of this study are Dr. Neo Jeanett Melamu at North-West University in Mmabatho, South Africa, Dr. Wandile Fundo Tsabedze at the University of South Africa, in Pretoria, South Africa, Dr. Petro Erasmus at the North-West University in Mmabatho, South Africa, and Dr. Liezl Schlebusch from the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University of Cape Town in Cape Town, South Africa. It was

published in *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, and has not yet been cited in other works. The research had in-depth thematic analysis, and provides unique culturally specific understanding. However, it is not very generalizable outside of Setswana culture and has a very small sample size. The article also focuses on caregiver perspectives, and only female caregivers were interviewed.

This source corroborates information from many other sources as well as providing detailed insight into how communities treat children with ASD. It adds support to the common sociocultural perceptions of ASD in Africa identified so far.

Pillay S, Duncan M, de Vries PJ. 'We wait and we wait'-caregiver perspectives on autism spectrum disorder services in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. *Child Adolesc Ment Health*. 2024 May;29(2):145-153. doi: 10.1111/camh.12704. Epub 2024 Mar 27. PMID: 38533770.

This article is a qualitative study that investigates the experiences of caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Western Cape of South Africa who are waiting for educational services. Using purposive sampling, the researchers recruited participants by email or phone based on medical and educational personnel referrals. Culminating in two focus groups of 10 caregivers, the authors explored participants' perspectives on the state of ASD-related services. Researchers conducted separate interviews on these focus groups using an interview guide with two main research questions: (a) what do participants think of current autism services in the Western Cape and (b) what would they suggest to improve service delivery. Once data was collected, three distinct categories were identified: cost of waiting, barriers while waiting, and expecting action.

Category one, cost of waiting, emphasized the financial strain put on families from private services, emotional exhaustion, and loss of developmental time.

Category two, barriers while waiting, looked at unresponsive systems, bureaucratic delays, poor communication, and unclear processes reported by caregivers.

Category three, expecting actions, emphasized the desire for policy change observed amongst caregivers, including regular updates on their children, empathetic care, and inclusive education.

Caregivers recommend better communication, more specialized education, and increased awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder to improve circumstances for patients and caregivers. This study was authored by Dr. Sarosha Pillay, Dr. Madeleine Duncan, and Dr. Petrus J. de Vries from the University of Capetown in South Africa and published in a peer-reviewed journal titled *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (Wiley, 2024). It provides valuable perspectives from caregivers who struggle with access to essential resources such as education and unique treatment plans for those with ASD. A potential bias is that this study is entirely urban-based and, therefore, does not account for caregivers who live in rural areas.

This source provides valuable insight into the state of ASD educational services in the Western Cape region of South Africa and how that affects not only people who are diagnosed with ASD but also the caregivers who are providing them with the help that they need. By highlighting the pitfalls and frustrations caregivers experience when it comes to services offered for ASD, we can better understand the problem at a big-picture level and address them more efficiently. The source is also relevant to our project in that it adds to the overall literature in cross-cultural perspectives on ASD by including caregiver perspectives on care to individuals with ASD in non-Western geographic areas.

Communism and Karl Marx's Distorted Reflection

Abstract:

This essay pushes the boundaries of social theory by applying trauma research to longstanding critiques of capitalism and socialism. It re-frames economic exploitation as a symptom of collective dysregulation, not merely class conflict. It suggests that neither capitalism nor socialism can offer true liberation without integrating emotional intelligence and healing the fragmentation of ego. It challenges the dialectic to evolve beyond antithesis into relational synthesis. The introduction of Ego-Eurocentrism, relational consciousness, and recursive dialectics expands the field's conceptual vocabulary. By incorporating ideas from quantum field theory, morphic resonance, and social neuroscience, this essay contributes an emergent paradigm shift. The conclusion powerfully reframes communistic conditions as a result of consciousness, not a mechanism to achieve it. This vision of a nonviolent, awareness-based revolution presents an alternative to cycles of political violence and reactive resistance.

Main Paper:

The TED Talk with Nick Hanauer (Beware, Fellow Plutocrats, the Pitchforks are coming) offered many solutions to capitalism's problems. As a self-identified plutocrat, he discussed an emergent need for his capitalist class to fix the "glaring economic inequalities in our society" (TED, 2014, 4:10), noting that inequality is terrible for business. He advocates for a model similar to that taken by Henry Ford, who doubled his worker's pay, ensuring they could afford to purchase the products they were making themselves. Hanauer spoke of a "middle out" economy that rejects mechanistic views, addressing Marx's ideas about capitalism's exploitative nature dehumanizing workers when private ownership alienates them by creating mechanistic "cogs in the machine" who compete in a "dog eat dog" world (Appelrouth and Edles, pg.45). Hanauer offers numerous counters to this Social Darwinism such as viewing

the economy as an ecosystem sustained by feedback loops between customers and businesses, where raising wages results in increased demands, which increases hiring, wages, demand and profits. This bottom-up model is something that I have previously written about in regards to affirmative action (Winters et. al, 2024) and advocated for because bottom-up economies prioritize the worker and reject trickle-down economics, which results in a healthy work culture and a sustainable economy.

Chapter Two of our Social Theory text states that Marx saw problems with capitalism due to the concentration of wealth, the growth of monopoly capitalism, businesses' unscrupulous pursuit of profit, the relationship between government economic policy and the interests of the capitalist class, and alienation workers experience in the workplace (Appelrouth and Edles, pg 39). I would agree with those issues but I feel they all can be explained by the same root cause, a self-sustaining loop of trauma which creates an egoic, binary, linear thinking process. Capitalism relies on fear and scarcity to keep its citizens stuck in survival mode and is inherently traumatizing, and this trauma creates black and white, dualistic thoughts. My previous research has explored egocentrism leading to "cultural amnesia," (Snow, 2024) the phenomenon where most traumatized individuals aren't even able to identify the ways that their experiences have shaped their thought process because from their perspective, their experiences are normal and therefore go unquestioned. The thesis (social problems) creates an antithesis (counter problem), but never reaches full synthesis (solution) due to the binary process that is involved.

Karl Marx's theories are inherently flawed, as is communism itself as a practice, because they were not trauma informed and lack our current modern-day information regarding adverse childhood experiences, attachment and polyvagal theories, as well as Neuroscience. They were written with the same reactive binary cognition that capitalism's egocentrism initially created. This dualistic cognitive trauma loop is evident in the formation of Marx's philosophy of thought, but also remains evident in the earlier main theoretical influences that he originally based his thinking on. One of the defining characteristics of binary cognition is its linear adherence to rationality that divorces contents from its context, and Marx relied on rationality as the foundation for all his conclusions. But binary logic becomes a reactionary cage that traps the mind

into attempting to solve problems without fully understanding the causes, being unable to think outside the box that capitalism's inherent trauma puts it in.

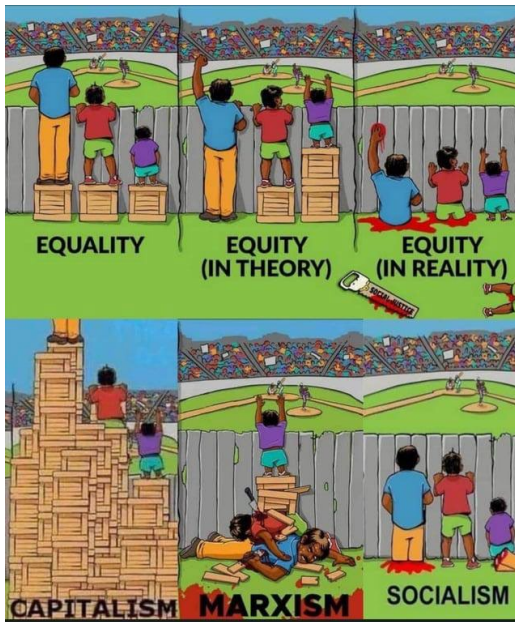
Henri de Saint-Simon attempted to counter egoist competition and exploitation with common ownership through Christian Socialism, which heavily influenced Marx's later theories. But the Christian Socialist movement lacked a full understanding of "Ego-Eurocentric" ideology, a term recently coined by author Lorenzo Kamel in his book "History Below the Global: on and beyond the coloniality of power in historical research" published in 2024. While creating an antithesis to capitalism's thesis, Socialism did not provide a full synthesis, because it did not adequately respond to the cause of egoism, it just put a metaphorical band-aid over a bullet hole. In a similar fashion, Adam Smith's ideas about relationships between economy and policy relied on Enlightenment-era ideas that failed to account for how deeply egoic hierarchies and binary Eurocentric assumptions about progress shaped social and economic systems. The Christian Socialist movement advocated for mutual aid and collective care without deconstructing the underlying thoughts which lead to exploitation, dominance and power-over social structures, objectification and subjugation. Adam Smith's economic model, which heavily influenced Marx, was built on the assumption that these forms of competition are normal and naturally occurring instead of byproducts of relational trauma and dysregulated nervous systems, which modern science has now proven. Both capitalist and socialist traditions fragment individuals and societies because they bypass the natural world, human emotion, and relational attunement. It is this separation of mind from body, man from nature, logic from emotion that creates egoic issues and the perception of self as existing separate from the material world to begin with.

Marx attempted to place another band-aid over the same bullet hole, but failed to remove the bullet just like his predecessors. The concept of historical materialism, which argues that humans are shaped by the material world and not vice versa, is rooted in dualistic thinking, divorcing the rational mind from the emotional body and separating the individual from the whole. This disidentification from the material world and egoic self is what our textbook refers to as "pure consciousness" (Appelrouth and Edles, pg. 58), where one is not burdened with matter, which can be

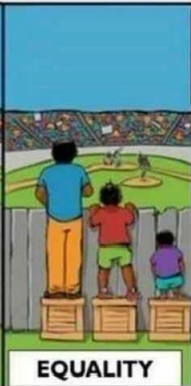
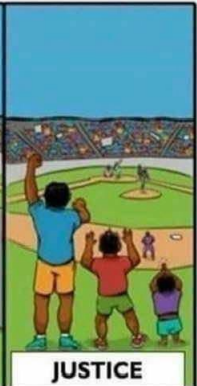
witnessed in the rest of the animal kingdom. Other animals are lacking in this separate sense of self and their purity of consciousness is a direct reflection of the morphic field (quantum reality). Dualistic binary cognition or “self-identification with the material” fragments the individual into a separate ego which is responsible for the consciousness that forms Marx’s “superstructure” of society. The superstructure concept relies on the economy for its foundation, but Marx based his ideas on Adam Smiths’ and thus failed to fully understand the economy as an interdependent ecosystem just like nature. When Marx inverted Hegel’s philosophy that thoughts and beliefs shape our reality, and instead adhered to the idea of our experiences determining our ideas, Marx perpetuated the earlier bypassing of his philosophical mentors and again offered an antithesis to capitalism, but not a full synthesis or solution to it. A true synthesis would hold that both things can be true; that our experiences shape our thoughts, but also that our thoughts shape our experiences. This dialectical synthesis is something I explore more fully in my own social theories (Spirolateral.org) which explore conflicts as recursive feedback loops that ultimately increase social cohesion once resolved. This is very similar to Hegel’s ideas but my trauma informed social metatheory builds on Hegel’s original philosophy by incorporating modern-day Neuroscience, polyvagal and attachment theories into a full synthesis that fundamentally rethinks our world and how we relate to it and each other.

The quote by Desmond Tutu, “We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in,” is a perfect example of trauma-informed thinking capable of shifting perspective and considers nuance. This concept is key to our “species being,” where we fully achieve our human potential. Humanity cannot become fully actualized or realized until it synthesizes the dualism and separation keeping it from obtaining “pure consciousness.” Marx argued that an individual’s existence is determined by their materialistic conditions, and his ideas about the ruling class controlling society’s abilities to self-actualize are true, but at the time he created his theories, Marx lacked sufficient information to connect consciousness to the dualistic mindsets that are perpetuated and reinforced through scarcity and fear, which are features inherent to capitalism. When Hegel stated that consciousness determines life, this was also a factual statement about how our egoism has shaped our society, economy and policies. A full synthesis of the two ideas would illustrate how egoism results in a

fall from pure consciousness and a descent into the material world, but also shows how species being, or full actualization, is pure consciousness and can be obtained by realizing there is no separation between the material world and the self, because the ego is a byproduct of capitalism. In synthesizing both ideas, heaven descends to earth, and then ascends from earth to heaven; not through violent revolutions, conflict and forced socialism or communism, but through a breakthrough in awareness that ultimately would create communistic conditions. The cooperation and lack of conflict that defines communist philosophy and renders the state and exploitative government obsolete is a natural byproduct of species being, not the precursor to obtaining it. Assuming that communistic conditions are a mechanism to achieve higher states of class and social consciousness and not the other way around replicates mechanistic “cog in the machine” capitalist ideology. This is the inherent flaw in his logic: by inverting Hegel’s ideas instead of incorporating them, Marx’s ego put the metaphorical cart before the horse. As Nick Hanauer said in his TED Talk (19:07), “How obviously, transparently self-serving all of this is.”





 REALITY	 EQUALITY	 EQUITY	 JUSTICE
One gets more than is needed, while the other gets less than is needed. Thus, a huge disparity is created.	The assumption is that everyone benefits from the same supports. This is considered to be equal treatment.	Everyone gets the support they need, which produces equity.	All 3 can see the game without supports or accommodations because the cause(s) of the inequity was addressed. The systemic barrier has been removed.

Assata Shakur, From Ego to Eden: Collective Identity as a Weapon of Mass Construction

Assata Shakur (born JoAnne Deborah Byron, 1947-2025) was a revolutionary thinker, activist, and former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army. Her life's trajectory embodied the intersection of systemic oppression, resistance, and the search for healing. Imprisoned in 1973 under controversial charges and later granted asylum in Cuba, Shakur became both a political prisoner and a living testimony to the state's fear of radical love. Her autobiography, *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), continues to inspire generations by blending personal narrative with sharp political analysis, showing how racism, patriarchy, and capitalism function together as systems of coercion and alienation.

Her famous words, “We need to be weapons of mass construction, weapons of mass love. It’s not enough just to change the system. We need to change ourselves,” reflect not only a political strategy but also a profound psychospiritual insight. Shakur recognized that revolution must reach beyond institutions into the very fabric of identity, love, and human connection. Where I trace how colonization inflicted hermeneutical injustice by stealing our collective identity and replacing it with the ego’s false self, Shakur insists that healing begins by reconstructing ourselves through wielding love, community, and relational care as tools of our collective liberation.

My theories, whether through the Functional Conflict Perspective, Mirror Integration Theory, or explorations of Edenic consciousness and the collective nervous system, stand in solidarity with Shakur’s legacy. Both insist that liberation is not just about dismantling oppressive systems but also about reclaiming who we are as collective beings. Her call to become “weapons of mass love” echoes my progressive insistence that true restoration lies in integration of self and shadow, of deed and doer, of body and spirit, of individual and collective. In honoring her life,

my work extends her vision, transforming love from an act of resistance into the foundation for a flourishing global future.

Eden: Collective Self Before Separation

In many Indigenous cultures, identity was relational and collective rather than individual. Witnessed in autonyms such as Diné, Dene, Inuit, Anishinaabe, Māori, Aymara, Quechua, San, Bantu, Sámi, Yanomamö and my own ancestors Lenni Lenape, all these names translate simply to “the people” or “human beings.” This linguistic pattern reflects a worldview where self was understood relationally and multidimensionally as as a fractal of the whole (Deloria, 2003; Kimmerer, 2013; Cajete, 1994; Hallowell, 1960) rather than an individual separate from existence.

Eden wasn’t just a mythic paradise but primarily a state of consciousness without the split between knower and known. Films like *The Hadza: Last of the First* (Watkins, 2018) and *The Feast* (Asch & Chagnon, 1976) capture this relational flow of survival grounded in reciprocity, and group coordination achieved through rhythm and entrainment rather than fear and control. Recognizing this is not to glorify precolonial life or exoticize the indigenous. Conflict and suffering has certainly existed everywhere alongside human history to some extent. Rather, it is to take an and/both approach: combining relational wisdom from the past with what we now know from science, psychology, and technology (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Porges, 2011; Maté, 2010) to successfully move forward as a species together. By holding this both/and perspective, we can design futures that are less fragmented, less punitive, and more sustainable.

As Assata Shakur urged, “It’s not enough just to change the system. We need to change ourselves.” Restoring Eden requires both structural and personal transformation to become weapons of mass construction, guided by love.

Separation: The Fall into Ego

Colonial systems imposed moral dualism, property, punitive law, and forced childrearing practices that fractured relational unity. *First Contact* (Connolly & Leahy, 1983) documents Papuan highlanders’ first

encounter with Europeans, whom they described as “not of the living.” Rabbit-Proof Fence (Noyce, 2002) portrays the deliberate severing of Aboriginal children from their families to “breed out” Indigenous traits. This was not only cultural genocide but also the weaponization of attachment rupture, severing children from mothers to manufacture the compliant, individualized ego required by colonial society. This practice echoes Mary Ainsworth’s finding that American infants, unlike Ugandan ones, had already been conditioned to suppress protest in separation, which is a sign of cultural conditioning and infant training in emotional avoidance (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Emotions, meant to be coregulated relationally and experienced collectively, are now held in the body by the false egoic “I,” which replays its trauma repetitively by creating similar circumstances to the traumatic incident until it can be healed. This pattern of unhealed trauma can be seen throughout colonial human history. Here lies the fall into ego through the invention of the “bonded I,” engineered by colonization to replace collective identity with fragmented individuality (Snow, 2025a).

Marx, Hegel, and the Inversion of Spirit

Karl Marx recognized this fracture and called it alienation: the estrangement of human beings from their labor, from nature, from each other, and from themselves (Marx, 1844/1978). His insight was profound, yet incomplete. Marx built his critique on Hegel’s dialectic but inverted its foundation. For Hegel, history unfolded as the self-realization of the world spirit, a dialectical process of consciousness moving toward freedom. Alienation was, for Hegel, a stage in the journey of spirit estranged from itself, eventually returning to unity. Marx rejected this metaphysical grounding. In his inversion, spirit was dismissed, and material conditions alone became the engine of history. The dialectic shifted from ideas to economics, from collective consciousness to labor and class struggle.

This move had consequences. By cutting away the world spirit, Marx reproduced the very Western dualism he sought to overcome, with matter versus mind, body versus spirit, individual versus whole. His collectivism was political and economic, but it lacked the relational and existential dimension. Alienation was explained through labor but not through colonial disruption of consciousness itself. Thus, Marx’s

materialism remained trapped within the ego's illusion, critiquing capitalism's fractures but not able to heal the deeper separation between self and collective being. To decolonize Marx is to restore Hegel's sense that spirit, or what Indigenous traditions call relational being, remains the ground of our individual and collective human identity. Only when material analysis is reintegrated with relational consciousness can collectivism heal economies through our nervous systems, not just from extractive labor but love itself.

Illusion: Punitive Justice and the Shadow

The absence of the world spirit in Marx's framework mirrors the absence of collective identity in Western justice. Punitive law assumes a separate will, a guilty individual ego that must be punished. It fails to recognize what both Indigenous cosmologies and Hegel's spirit affirmed, that self is never separate from the collective. Punishment is the ritualized rejection of the shadow. Just as children were shamed or abandoned to enforce "rules," adults are exiled or incarcerated to maintain social order. Carl Jung (1959/1968) called this evil principle the projection of what we disown in ourselves. The same projection extends beyond human beings. As Michael Corthell (2025) observes, "If we ever want to understand why there is so much cruelty in the world, why children are starving, why wars rage endlessly, why our societies feel broken and disconnected, we need to look at how we treat animals. Because the way we treat animals is not separate from the way we treat each other. It is a mirror." The colonized ego's false self maintains its illusion of separation by constructing hierarchies of domination with human over animal, colonizer over colonized, adult over child. In each case, the false "I" secures its identity by denying relationality and objectifying the other.

This reveals that ego is not merely a private illusion but a structural ideology. The false self sustains itself by reproducing domination across species and systems. Restorative justice and the restoration of Eden requires dismantling these egoic hierarchies and returning to the truth that there is no "other" to exploit, only the whole self mirrored in every being.

Hermeneutical Injustice: Stolen Identity and the False Self

We are operating with an inadequate base of knowledge that is necessary for individual, collective, societal, and planetary flourishing because we have been subjected to hermeneutical injustice (Palmer, 2025). This occurs when people cannot make sense of their own experiences because the conceptual tools to interpret them are absent or suppressed. Most notably as an example before the term sexual harassment existed, women could not name or describe their daily violations. The experience was real, but the language was missing (Fricker, 2007).

Colonization inflicted hermeneutical injustice on all of us. Our identity as a collective being was stolen and replaced with the false self of the individual ego. Relational cosmologies and languages were dismantled and replaced with concepts of property, hierarchy, and punishment. Mental illness can be seen, in part, as a symptom of this hermeneutical injustice: a case of mistaken identity, where our nervous systems remain wired for collectivity while culture insists on separation. Assata Shakur's vision responds directly to this harm: "We need to be weapons of mass construction, weapons of mass love. It's not enough just to change the system. We need to change ourselves." Our "weapons" are love, healing, community, and liberation. They are inherently threatening to systems of oppression because they restore the very ways of knowing that hermeneutical injustice tries to erase. Healing requires reconstructing our conceptual worlds, not just with new words, but with new ways of living that reflect our true identity as a collective self.

Discordance: Nervous Systems Out of Place

The discordance hypothesis (Nesse, 1994) shows that many modern conditions arise from a mismatch between evolved biology and industrial society. Psychologically, this means our nervous systems are wired for collective identity and for constant relational attunement, reciprocity, and co-regulation. Attachment science (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1969/1982) shows that children thrive through co-regulation, not isolation. Polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011) reveals that safety emerges through social engagement. Trauma research (Maté, 2010) demonstrates how disconnection fuels illness and addiction.

Autism highlights this mismatch. Autistic people struggle in binary, hierarchical cultures not because of deficit, but because their cognition reflects the nervous system's deeper orientation toward non-hierarchical, collective identity. Neurodiversity's resistance to hierarchy is evidence of biology's revolt against ego-driven separation. In short, the nervous system itself resists the fall into ego. Eden lives on in our bodies, which keep the score and still remember, even when our minds lack the words to communicate our felt distress.

Collective Identity: Integration and Restoration

The cure for ego is not death or rejection but integration. As Tolle (1999) explains, the ego dissolves when awareness realizes it is not its thoughts but the ground of being. Freud (1923/1961) noted that ego functions as a tool; it need not rule. Indigenous traditions embody this restoration. Navajo peacemaking and Haudenosaunee condolence rituals heal relationships, not condemn individuals (Ross, 2006). These align with modern restorative justice, which separates deed from doer and treats harm as relational rupture, not evil to be exiled. Poet Joy Harjo (2025) reminds us that democracy itself was influenced by Indigenous governance systems: "Democracy in this country was influenced by Iroquoian and Muskogean forms of bilateral government in which all sides could come together to speak and work together... We will need courage and need to remember always kindness and fierce love." Her reflection ties the Edenic wisdom of relational governance directly to our present moment of political polarization and ecological crisis. Neurodiversity and disability movements likewise affirm collective being over deficit, and autism acts as a cultural mirror reflecting back colonial's dysfunctional social norms, with all exposing how Western individualism distorts relational life (Snow, 2025).

As Clay Jorgensen reminds us, in crisis the spell of separation breaks and we are forced to remember our interdependence. And as Joseph Campbell (1991) observes, "Opportunities to find deeper powers within ourselves come when life seems most challenging." Taken together with Shakur's call to become weapons of mass love, these insights form a chorus of Indigenous wisdom, revolutionary courage, personal reflection, and mythic insight, all pointing toward the same truth.

Conclusion: From Eden to Ego, and Back

The ego is the fall from Eden, which imposes an illusion of separation. Colonization enforced this illusion through punitive justice, hermeneutical injustice, and developmental rupture. Marx recognized alienation, but by inverting Hegel and rejecting the world spirit, he remained bound by the dualism that sustains egoism.

To move forward, we need an and/both synthesis: Indigenous relational wisdom + modern science (Ainsworth, Bowlby, Porges, Maté) + Marx's critique of capital reintegrated with Hegel's world spirit + Shakur's fierce insistence that transformation must be both systemic and personal. This current cultural need argues for the existence of a bridge like my Functional Conflict Perspective, and this emergent synthesis creates the foundation for my theories. From Eden to ego, and back again, the task is to integrate it into the garden of collective being. Where Shakur called us to be "weapons of mass love," my frameworks offer the tools to enact that love systemically, psychologically, and globally. My work and writing carries forward her vision, showing that the struggle for justice is also the struggle to remember who we are, not just isolated egos, but as a collective being capable of fierce love.

Joy Harjo (2025) reminds us of the courage and fierce love required to restore relational governance. Clay Jorgensen (2025) reminds us that crisis dissolves separation and compels us to remember our interdependence. Joseph Campbell (1991) reminds us that challenge is the threshold to deeper power. And Assata Shakur reminds us that we must become weapons of mass construction, weapons of mass love.

Together, these voices testify that the path beyond ego is not domination or exile, but remembrance: of fierce love, of interdependence, of the conceptual and spiritual tools that oppression tried to erase. The work of restoration is both systemic and intimate, both collective and personal. Our liberation begins by remembering who we are as not isolated egos, but both the people AND, primarily, as the whole.

From God to Government: The Bureaucratization of Spirit and the Loss of Relational Order

“Religion is an elaborate excuse for what man has done to woman, and to the Earth.”

-Alice Walker

This essay explores how Western colonial individualism was imposed on indigenous cultures using primarily Biblical texts to socialize natives into subjugation through external controls and hierarchical order. Metaphorically, we can extend Max Weber’s bureaucratic theory beyond the state or economy and go all the way to the spiritual realm. What began as direct transmission through figures like Christ or other mystics eventually underwent “routinization of charisma.” The relational truths that they embodied were then codified into dogmas and hierarchies, much like Weber described in how charismatic movements become bureaucratic institutions over time. The bureaucracy of organized Christian religion now often mirrors the very coercive structures that these figures transcended.

Not to get too esoteric on main here, but one example of a bureaucracy could be the celestial or spiritual hierarchy. At the top is God or the divine architect, who governs his creation with a series of divine laws such as karma, polarity, and correspondence (“as above, so below”). These rules govern how things evolve, interact, and are ordered. Each planet, dimension, and plane of existence is overseen by councils, federations, or brotherhoods. For Earth, angels and devas oversee karmic balances and keep records of the incarnated humans (citizens). Initiates, mystics (such as Christ), and alchemists are like trained operatives, often given sensitive roles or permitted to access higher level information through initiations (internal promotions). Individual souls master their inner lessons and are promoted (or demoted) accordingly. Each level of ascension is like moving up in rank or authority, with greater access to light, power, and responsibility being granted to them. Above them all

sit the Watchers, quantum beings who monitor without intervention. They ensure that the cosmic system remains balanced across its vast cycles. They are the spiritual auditors, intervening only when universal equilibrium is at stake. Within this framework, Satan and the fallen angels could be understood as former operatives who once held positions of authority but rebelled against the order of ascension. Rather than serving as guardians of balance, they chose to disrupt it, introducing distortion into the cosmic system. In this sense, their role is not merely destructive but paradoxically functional: by challenging harmony, they create the very tests and temptations through which souls confront their own weaknesses and grow stronger. If angels and devas are like administrators and auditors of karmic law, then the fallen represent rogue agents still within the system, but operating as catalysts for shadow integration. They embody resistance to light, ensuring that free will remains intact and that progress up the spiritual hierarchy is earned, not granted. In this way, even rebellion has a place in the metric, forcing humanity to face polarity and choose alignment with balance or distortion.

Appelrouth and Edles define bureaucracy as organizations that routinize and standardize people and products, as well as the rational procedures that govern them (p. 160); they are the dominant form of social organization in modern society (p. 192). In “Bureaucracy (1925)” (p. 193) Max Weber described bureaucracies as including specific features such as hierarchical authority structures reliant on forced meritocracy, divided labor, and strict rules reinforced through coercive controls. Bureaucratic agencies are features of the state, whereas bureaucratic enterprises are features of the economy (p. 193). Weber stated that bureaucracies usually come into power on the basis of leveling economic and social differences (p. 195) and that authority results from a demand for “equality before the law.” Economic and social exploitation arise as compensation to authority figures for their duties and corresponding ranks. A capitalistic economy forces individuals to “conform to capitalistic rules of action” which creates “a process of economic survival of the fittest” (p. 169). These ideas arise as a reflection of the economy, but directly conflict with traditionalism and human nature which defaults to being content with living simply, and being happy earning just enough to support simple life (p. 170). In “The

Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904)," Weber described how capitalism shapes our moral attitudes by dominating human nature and turning the acquisition of money into a virtue through weaponizing lack and scarcity, which informs individuals that their ethical duty is to increase their own capital (p. 168). This is accomplished through both incentives and deterrents (such as the opportunities to own more goods or the consequences for not being able to obtain them) as well as through the commodification of personal time ("time is money").

Unlike Marx, who saw class as being defined by a group's relationship to labor and the means of production, Weber defined class as people who share "life chances" or whose fates are determined by their opportunities to produce capital and own goods. The video by Sociology Live! "Alienation" focused on Marx's ideas of class and how capitalist economies alienate workers from their products, society, and sense of self (2:00) because what we do connects to who we are and product based societies stifle human nature and creativity. Weber described an "iron cage of rationality" as the spiritual and psychological cancer that metastasizes from this alienation and the adherence to logical and linear structures which are formed in capitalist and bureaucratic organizations. This collective rationalization determines individual fate and the chances that people have to make personal choices (p. 166). I agree with Weber that this cancerous cage is increasing in size and magnitude, because collective alienation increases with bureaucratic rules and forced regulations. Barry Schwartz covered this social phenomenon in his TED Talk "Our Loss of Wisdom" where he discussed the importance of adopting Practical Wisdom as a cultural virtue. Schwartz defined moral will as doing right by people, moral skill as the ability to know what that means, and practical wisdom as moral will and moral skill combined (3:00). When things go wrong, humans tend to reach for two tools to regulate society, 1) Rules and 2) Incentives (7:37) but these are a short term fix that creates a downward spiral which chips away at moral skill and undermines moral will (8:30). An overdependence on incentives, such as occurs in capitalistic and bureaucratic systems, causes actors to lose morale and activities to diminish in morality (12:40). In his talk, Schwartz explains that while rules provide structure, incentives often seem like a subtler way to regulate behavior, rewarding what is deemed desirable and discouraging

what is not. At first glance, this seems effective: incentives can guide people toward socially acceptable actions without the harshness of punishment. For example, bonuses may encourage productivity, or fines may deter harmful practices. But Schwartz argues that over time this reliance corrodes the deeper fabric of moral reasoning. When people act primarily for external rewards or to avoid penalties, they no longer cultivate the inner compass of knowing what is right and why. Incentives gradually replace intrinsic motivation with extrinsic compliance, leading people to ask, “What’s in it for me?” rather than, “What is the right thing to do?” This not only diminishes moral skill and the ability to discern the nuances of a situation, but also weakens moral will, since people no longer feel responsible for acting ethically when incentives dictate their choices. In other words, incentives help regulate society in the short term, but by outsourcing morality to external payoffs, they erode the very wisdom that sustains ethical communities.

Applying this understanding to Weber’s definition of bureaucracy shows how increased rules as well as added incentives ultimately degrade a capitalist system’s moral integrity through the iron cage’s cancerous growth that is sustained by its dysfunctional regulatory processes. Unlike Marx who believed the proletariat would eventually overthrow the bourgeoisie to create a new economic system, Weber felt that revolution is impossible due to the iron cage. But Weber defines revolution as “the forceful creation of entirely new formations of authority” (p. 197) supplanting one form of bureaucracy with another. What if revolution could be redefined as a natural departure from overregulation through application of practical wisdom? Schwartz suggested that moral work can be taught by the embodiment and examples of ordinary heroes and everyday moral exemplars. Bureaucracy teaches us to devalue each other, ourselves, and our time; by its example, we are taught exploitation and objectification. Could a new model be created peacefully through the process of re-moralizing work, infusing systems with practical wisdom? Schwartz stated “any incentive system can be subverted by bad will” (12:40), but I believe that incentive systems can also be elevated and ennobled through leaders who embody respect and good character.

Bureaucracy leads to exploitation and objectification because it prioritizes rules, efficiency, and measurable outcomes over human

dignity and relational context. When institutions are organized around rigid procedures, individuals are reduced to numbers, cases, or “units of productivity.” For example, a patient in a healthcare system may be treated as a diagnosis code rather than a whole person, or a worker in a corporation may be valued solely for output rather than creativity or well-being. This depersonalization teaches people to see each other less as human beings with complex needs and more as obstacles, resources, or tools for achieving institutional goals. In turn, exploitation emerges when human labor, time, and even suffering are extracted for profit or compliance, while objectification occurs when people’s identities are flattened into roles of student, patient, employee, or offender, without recognition of their full humanity. In Schwartz’s terms, bureaucracy becomes a moral teacher, modeling indifference and training people to normalize systems that strip away empathy and relational responsibility. If bureaucracy teaches exploitation and objectification, then revolution redefined through practical wisdom becomes the quiet but radical act of re-humanizing daily life. Schwartz’s point about ordinary heroes and moral exemplars shows how change doesn’t require grand upheaval but begins in small, embodied acts of wisdom. A teacher who bends rigid rules to nurture a struggling student, a doctor who listens to the full story behind a patient’s symptoms rather than just the chart, or a worker who prioritizes compassion over efficiency - all of these resist the bureaucratic impulse to reduce people to roles and outputs. By modeling moral will and moral skill, these exemplars remind others of their humanity and cultivate cultures of care. Over time, such practices accumulate into a broader cultural departure from overregulation, with revolution not as destruction of systems, but as their transformation through lived, everyday wisdom. This re-centers ethics in human relationships rather than in rules or incentives, creating a more resilient and compassionate social fabric.

An everyday revolution reframes what revolution means by moving it away from images of mass upheaval and violence toward the consistent practice of practical wisdom and moral will combined with moral skill in daily life. Instead of overthrowing systems outright, it is a natural departure from overregulation, a quiet transformation that begins when individuals act with humanity in places where bureaucracy usually erodes it. Change becomes possible not through grand gestures, but

through the accumulation of small, relational acts that reintroduce compassion into institutions shaped by efficiency and control.

Bureaucracy teaches exploitation and objectification by reducing people to rules, categories, and metrics. Incentives replace intrinsic morality with external compliance, making individuals act less from a sense of “what is right” and more from “what is rewarded.” In this way, institutions normalize efficiency over empathy, presenting dehumanization as rational and necessary. Over time, this corrodes both moral skill, the ability to discern nuance, and moral will, the responsibility to care for others beyond personal gain.

The everyday revolution counters this process by embedding humanity into ordinary acts. At the micro level, a teacher who bends a rule to meet a child’s emotional needs, a nurse who listens beyond quotas, or a worker who chooses compassion over productivity metrics demonstrates practical wisdom in action. At the meso level, communities and organizations can shift practices by adopting restorative approaches instead of punitive rules, encouraging leaders to model transparency and trust, and creating spaces for storytelling and shared rituals that value human connection over procedure. At the macro level, policies can be designed with flexibility and relational trust, shifting evaluation metrics from narrow productivity to measures of well-being, inclusion, and trust-building.

Scaling practical wisdom relies on modeling and culture. Ordinary heroes become exemplars, teaching moral skill by example, while narratives in media and education highlight relational success rather than efficiency. As these practices spread, they create feedback loops: when moral skill grows, less reliance on rigid rules and incentives is needed, allowing moral will to thrive. In this way, ordinary actions accumulate into cultural tipping points, gradually undermining bureaucracy’s dehumanizing logic.

Revolution, then, is reframed as re-humanization from within. It is not a singular event but an ongoing practice of presence, compassion, and moral responsibility. By re-centering ethics in human relationships rather than rules or incentives, everyday revolution transforms systems in ways that expand freedom while deepening connection. The most

radical act in a bureaucratized society is, paradoxically, the simplest one: to choose humanity, again and again, until it becomes the fabric of a new cultural order.

Weber warned that rationalization and bureaucracy would bring about the disenchantment of the world, draining it of all its morality. I've seen this firsthand in spiritual systems such as nationalized Christianity or even the New Age movement where love and lived wisdom get filtered through paywalls, bypassing, toxic positivity, forced policies and coercive protocols based on hierarchical systems of compliance, submission and control. Regulation and rules have taken the place of relational structures, and genuine mentorship has been commodified and corrupted by money and power, which creates cults of personality. In both Earthly and celestial hierarchies, order is maintained through systems that were once meant to reflect sacred harmony but now perpetuate fear through control, severing the very relational bonds that they were meant to inspire.

Returning to my earlier example of bureaucracy and examining it through a lens of "as above, so below," Weber's iron cage on Earth becomes a reflection of the divine architect's iron cage and the celestial bureaucracy that occurs in the spiritual realm. Just like God in the Old Testament was depicted as jealous and controlling, men on Earth now try to elicit love from women through coercive means like a parasite or cancerous growth instead of earning it through their good character, displays of mutual respect, protection and caring. I personally experienced a spiritual awakening over five years ago, and the catalyst for that realization was when I suddenly understood that my ten year marriage had been extremely psychologically and emotionally abusive. I can speak to the question that survivors are frequently asked ("Why didn't you leave sooner?"): I hadn't been able to recognize the abuse at first because our society and its institutions have normalized extractive and oppressive behaviors through bureaucratic controls, which function exactly like the coercion and psychological abuse tactics that my husband had used on me. The shift from the God of the Old Testament to the God of the New Testament can be seen as a reflection of the same "as above, so below" dynamic I am tracing here in earthly and spiritual bureaucracies. In the Old Testament, God is often depicted as authoritarian, jealous, and controlling; a ruler who demands obedience,

punishes rebellion, and enforces laws with fear. This mirrors Weber's iron cage, where rules dominate and love is extracted through coercion. The New Testament, however, reframes God through Christ as one who still seeks love and devotion, but does so through sacrifice and indebtedness. Christ's crucifixion becomes a cosmic act of substitution, meant to compel loyalty and devotion not by fear of law but by overwhelming guilt and gratitude. In this way, the divine architect's bureaucracy doesn't dissolve but simply transforms; coercion shifts from external punishment to internalized obligation. Love is still not freely given or mutually earned; it is demanded through a debt that can never be fully repaid. This supports my argument by showing how both testaments portray different versions of the same control mechanism: whether through law or sacrifice, the relationship is structured around securing love through power, rather than cultivating it through reciprocity, respect, and authentic care.

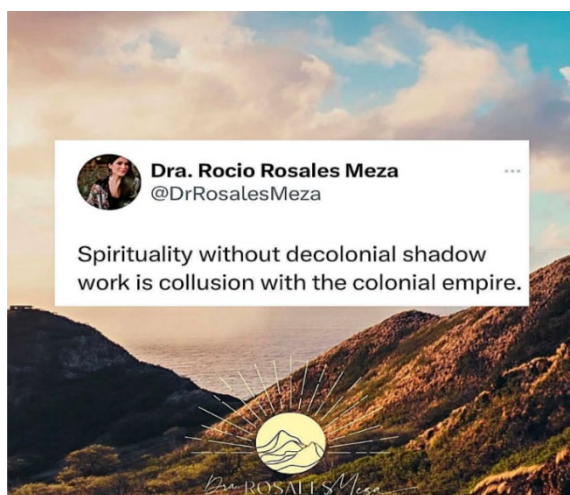
As I worked to heal from the traumas that had dysregulated my nervous system, I began to see how the government itself mirrors the same patterns of power and control I experienced in abusive relationships. Just as an abuser enforces obedience through fear, our government often uses surveillance, policing, and punitive laws to maintain compliance rather than fostering trust. Welfare and social services, instead of being supportive, are structured with strict eligibility rules and constant monitoring, echoing the conditional "care" of a controlling partner. Policies that punish rather than restore, such as mass incarceration, harsh immigration enforcement, or the withdrawal of resources from already vulnerable communities, which resemble the ways abusers withhold love, safety, or money to dominate their victims. Even the constant demand for productivity and compliance within bureaucratic systems parallels the emotional coercion I endured, where my worth was measured not by who I was but by how well I served someone else's agenda. At one point I assumed the issues in my marriage were a direct reflection of capitalism and its bureaucratic systems. But I have slowly gained an awareness of how coercion and power dynamics fractally permeate every facet of human existence on multiple levels and dimensions. Recently, I've realized that the corruption goes much higher than our government, and that capitalism and its associated bureaucracy actually mirror the current celestial hierarchy itself ("as above, so

below”). Reality is a mirror of the spiritual dimension, and bureaucratic systems reflect the divine architect's authoritarian tactics in overseeing creation. A successful revolution on Earth would require God to change from strict adherence to binary behaviorism and instead adopt methods of relational constructivism, changing from authoritarian means of governance to more authoritative and non-hierarchical structures that more evenly distribute power. Should practical wisdom be applied on a celestial level through equitable partnership, then the material plane would naturally follow this model; I wonder if the opposite is also true, and if the spiritual plane could be affected by changes made on Earth.

Currently, all of the dominant religions on Earth are patriarchal models which distort natural order and the universal laws of polarity and gender. For instance, stories in the Bible recount of Yahweh's divorce from the Queen of Heaven Asherah, which correlates with our historic and cultural erasure of the divine feminine and the removal of goddess archetypes from humanity's collective consciousness. Some scholars (Schmitt, 1995) interpret Hosea 2 (HarperCollins, 2004) as a symbolic depiction of Yahweh's relationship with Israel, where Israel is portrayed as an unfaithful wife. Others interpret the passage as a reference to Yahweh's divorce from Asherah, highlighting the conflict between monotheism and the polytheistic practices of the time. My academic studies and research have focused lately on family and systems theory, critically examining how to change a system from the inside, which is primarily due to my growing awareness of how corrupt the celestial hierarchy has become as a result of Israel's cursed covenant with Yahweh. As part of my recovery process from abuse, rape, the discarding from my ex-husband and the personal erasure I subsequently experienced (which mirrors the traumas of Asherah being discarded and erased from history after being used and abused by Yahweh), I have attempted to embody her archetype's practical wisdom and good moral character myself, hoping that others might choose to follow my/her example. If enough people did so, it might be possible to restore universal and harmonic balance and subsequently create a new economic system through non-violent revolutionary means, without recreating the current system's bureaucracy and its inherent systemic abuses. In my marriage, as in broader institutions, authority was enforced through control rather than mutual recognition, which raises two important

questions: what (or who) truly constitutes the legitimate authority in this dysfunctional and corrupt system, and how can the system heal to become relationally attuned?

One way this vision might be achieved is by recognizing that large-scale change begins in the small, embodied practices of individuals who choose to model alternative ways of being. Just as you have sought to embody Asherah's archetype of wisdom and moral character, others can take up similar roles by practicing relational ethics in their homes, workplaces, and communities, placing compassion, reciprocity, and care at the center of their decisions. As these practices spread, they create countercultures of trust and mutual accountability that weaken the legitimacy of coercive bureaucracies. Networks of such communities could form the scaffolding of a new economic system, one rooted in cooperation rather than exploitation. Cooperative ownership models, participatory governance, and localized economies are practical expressions of this ethos that can scale without recreating hierarchical abuse. The revolution, then, is not achieved through force but through sustained refusal to replicate the dynamics of domination, and through living differently, modeling differently, and gradually drawing others into a system that proves itself more humane and sustainable. Over time, the collective embodiment of this archetypal wisdom becomes not just personal healing, but a cultural rebalancing that transforms society from within.



Hyperreality is when an image or model of reality becomes more real than reality itself. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2021, p. 733). The example given in *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) was of the icons of divinity and images of visible theology replacing the immediate and relational nature of God. Simulacra such as this erases God from the consciousness of the people and masks the immediacy of pure being that God is. My experience as both a Buddhist and follower of Christ would agree with Baudrillard that hyperreality comes to replace reality. For instance, in the Zen tradition, Buddha is said to have silently held up a flower before his disciples, but only one disciple smiled because he grasped the relational and immediate symbol of pure being contained in that gesture. This is the first-order reality, in Baudrillard's terms, where a symbol (the flower) refers to a real, relational truth. But now the story is recorded and retold as a teaching. We no longer exist in relation to the being and is-ness of that immediate moment, and so the true meaning becomes lost as we instead relate to the idea and representation of it. This is the second order simulacrum, where we are no longer relating to the gesture or flower itself as the disciple did. When the image of Buddha holding the flower is painted or sculpted and displayed in temples or meditated on as a symbol of enlightenment, it has become the third order simulacrum, a simulation of the moment that no longer points to a direct truth but to another sign. Eventually, the story is retold without context and put on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and becomes spiritual branding. This is the fourth order simulation and the simulacrum of a simulacrum. The flower no longer means anything. It has become a sign that refers only to other signs. The relational divinity of the flower has been destroyed, and as Baudrillard puts it: "It is no longer God who is dead, but the image that has killed Him." The moment conceptual and lived relational truths are turned into teachings, hyperreality begins. American Buddhism kept the meditation from the Zen tradition, but divorces ethics and service to others, resulting in a hollow and dysfunctional system. The Buddhist teachings have been forgotten in the West; we need Maitreya to remind us of the dharma.

The same hyperreality can be said for Christianity. Jesus was said to have radical relationality with everything while healing, forgiving and breaking bread with others. His teachings were embodied and relational because he was a living model for the truths he spoke of. When the gospel stories were written and accounts of Jesus' life were retold, this

became the second order simulacrum, where images of crosses point to his divinity. The third order simulacrum emerges when the church becomes institutionalized as a mediator to God, replacing the direct relational experience. In the fourth order simulacrum, Christ becomes a brand reduced to soundbites such as “what would Jesus do?” put on bumper stickers while the sacred becomes a spectacle. As the pattern of simulacra is repeated, it becomes less and less meaningful - the implication being only those who were in the presence of Christ can ever have a real relationship with Him. Where does that leave his modern-day believers? Are their beliefs meaningless because of the distance between them and Christ?

In Hinduism and some schools of Buddhist thought, Maya is the illusion that the material world is real, with the Ultimate Reality lying just beyond it. But if “reality” does not exist anymore because only hyperreality does, then “illusion” can’t be said to exist either (Appelrouth and Edles, 2021, p. 745). If Baudrillard is correct, the metaphysical function of Maya collapses because illusion can’t exist without a reference point and Maya assumes a truth to veil. Without the real (liberation, enlightenment, nirvana) there is no truth to distort. If we live in a simulated loop of signs (a hyperreality), there is no “veil” and just endless play of surface. This means that the Buddhist concept of nirvana is actually still samsara, the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Maya is not a veil over Brahman; it is all there is. There is no awakening, only continuous simulation. Baudrillard turns Maya into an infinite recursion with no liberation. Where Vedanta says “Reality is obscured, but you can awaken,” Baudrillard says “There is no other reality to awaken to.” This realization itself can liberate, as one realizes there is no goal to attain, no hidden reality to awaken to, nothing to strive for. God is immediate and made apparent through one’s being.

I had direct experience of this hyperreality where representations replace experience when I was drawn into New Age spiritualism, which relies on ideas such as manifestation to keep one focused on something to gain. Life coaches and spiritual gurus use astrology, crystals, mantras and tarot readings to give people the illusion of something to attain. They weaponize their promises of an end to suffering to capitalize on other people’s pain instead of offering direct spiritual insights by providing the relational model that Jesus and Buddha did. New Age spirituality thrives

on social media where “spiritual” content is monetized into courses, retreats, and branded enlightenment and influencers post images of sunset meditations or altars as signs that point to other signs. Chakra adjustments are sold in subscription boxes and products are marketed to “raise your vibration” while the sacred becomes indistinguishable from consumption. New Age spirituality exemplifies Baudrillard’s worst fears in the death of the real, the loss of any anchor to truth, and the rise of simulation as a spiritual performance. It turns Maya from a veil to be pierced into a mirror that is forever reflecting ourselves, and never pointing beyond. In Baudrillardian terms, “God is no longer dead. God has been replaced by your algorithmic feed.”

The Colonization of Connection

In a world increasingly driven by the logics of convenience and control, emotional availability, accountability, and interdependence become radical acts.

“Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.” Henry David Thoreau

Max Weber’s theory of rationalization describes the increasing dominance of logic, efficiency, and predictability in modern life. He warned of the “iron cage” which is a system so efficient and rule-bound that it traps individuals in dehumanized, emotionally detached roles. Bureaucracy, as an expression of rationalization, values hierarchy, standardization, and depersonalization. Because the spread of rationalization and Max Weber’s iron cage is intertwined with “the global expansion of capitalism as a system of production and consumption” (Appelrouth and Edels, 2021, p. 832), George Ritzer’s McDonaldization critique of the spread of fast-food operating procedures into every public arena and facet of everyday life includes a fifth dimension, the irrationality of rationality. This element of the McDonaldization theory is described as “the dehumanization of individuals and social relationships that results from anonymous, superficial, scripted interactions between employees and customers” (2021, p. 833). Detachment is seen as wisdom in a world where emotional convenience is prioritized over intimacy, mutual understanding and patience. Modern systems of rationalization and McDonaldization enforce a culture of depersonalization, detachment, and scripted interactions which are conditions that directly clash with autistic ways of being. Autistic people often seek depth, honesty, and relational authenticity, yet they are forced into environments that demand superficial efficiency and emotional convenience. The “iron cage” of rationalized life mirrors the pressures many autistic individuals face to mask their true selves, suppress natural forms of communication, and conform to rigid social scripts. Similarly, the “irrationality of rationality”

resonates with the autistic experience of being dehumanized when social norms prioritize speed, predictability, and consumer logic over genuine connection, patience, and mutual understanding. In this sense, the critique of bureaucracy and McDonaldization is not only a sociological observation but also a window into the broader autistic theme: the struggle to remain authentic and relational in a world that systematically devalues depth, difference, and humanity.

When I think of how McDonaldization is affecting our social life, I think of the above quote by Thoreau, and also the works of philosopher Aldous Huxley, who feared we would become a trivial culture reduced to passivity and egoism. In *A Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley remarks that rationalists who are attempting to oppose tyranny fail to account for man's "almost infinite appetite for distractions." In his book *A Brave New World*, people are controlled by pleasure. I think these statements and Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization equally apply to cultural phenomena such as the widespread acceptance of polyamory and hookup culture, where hedonism, the needs of the ego and self-gratification are being prioritized over values such as loyalty, commitment, and self-sacrifice.

These ideas also help to explain the extreme emotional avoidance that has been normalized in our culture and which lead to behaviors such as ghosting, stonewalling, and self-isolating. This is a period in history where one wrong text can end a connection and people's worst moments are used to frame them as unsafe people forever. The most common communication pattern among heterosexual dating couples, the "female demand-male withdraw" pattern, referring to men's struggle to communicate in romantic relationships, has earned itself the psychological designation of "normative male alexithymia" forcing women to do all the emotional labor for relationships where they are repeatedly discarded regardless of what they do (Garnett, 2025). Because people (particularly men) have been conditioned to prioritize their comfort over growth, they are no longer willing to do the work that is required to maintain deep and meaningful connections, resulting in superficial social connections in place of authentic belonging that requires presence, effort, acceptance, support and forgiveness.

When placed within the framework of cancel culture, these dynamics of emotional avoidance and relational fragility take on a sharper systemic meaning. Cancel culture reflects a broader social conditioning where comfort is prioritized over growth and conflict is managed through withdrawal, rejection, or permanent severance rather than dialogue, repair, or forgiveness. In this sense, ghosting, stonewalling, and relational discarding are not only interpersonal habits but also cultural scripts reinforced by digital platforms and social norms. One wrong word or poorly timed message can lead to the erasure of an entire relationship, echoing the same dehumanizing tendencies found in bureaucratic rationalization: efficiency and safety at the cost of intimacy and patience. This intersects directly with Christopher Cosby's ongoing Ph.D. dissertation and research, which examines lateral social aggression between autistic individuals. His work highlights how marginalized groups, rather than finding solidarity, sometimes reproduce the broader culture's patterns of avoidance and punishment against one another. Cancel culture thus becomes an example of lateral aggression, where pain is displaced horizontally rather than being directed toward the oppressive systems that caused it. Framed this way, cancel culture mirrors "normative male alexithymia" and relational avoidance more broadly, where both are rooted in a cultural failure to practice the emotional labor of repair, leaving individuals to navigate superficial and precarious connections rather than cultivating authentic belonging through presence, effort, and forgiveness.

McDonaldization is a clear example of Weber's theories of rationality and bureaucracy because "true collaboration cannot exist when one party holds a veto card. In a hierarchical power structure, it will only ever be the appearance of collaboration" (Patel, 2025). Bureaucracy creates power-over mindsets that result in a "me first" individualized and McDonaldized society, one where everyone is concerned with protecting their own peace and has forgotten about the sacred collective middle space that is shared while in relationship to others. Ritzer's work on global consumption has strong parallels to John Calhoun's Universe 25 experiments, which showed the development of a "behavioral sink," where mice exhibited abnormal, often self-destructive behaviors that ultimately led to population collapse. I have been warning others about this

impending social catastrophe since beginning my research into attachment and polyvagal theory.

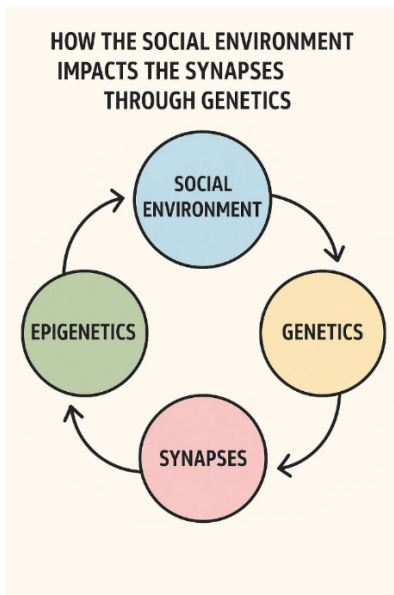
A behavioral sink is a term coined by John Calhoun to describe the collapse of social behaviors in his famous Universe 25 experiments with mice. In these studies, Calhoun created an environment of abundance with unlimited food, water, and shelter but placed the mice in an enclosed space where population growth was inevitable. At first, the community thrived. But as numbers increased and space became crowded, social order began to break down. Mice exhibited abnormal, maladaptive, and self-destructive behaviors: mothers abandoned or killed their young, males became either hyper-aggressive or completely withdrawn, mating patterns collapsed, and many individuals retreated into isolated, repetitive, and purposeless activities. Even though resources were plentiful, the collapse was driven by the social and relational strain of overcrowding and overstimulation, not by scarcity.

The danger of a behavioral sink lies in its relevance to human societies. It suggests that when social structures cannot keep pace with environmental and relational demands, communities may disintegrate not because of material lack, but because of a breakdown in healthy attachment, communication, and cooperation. Applied to global consumption and modern life, the behavioral sink warns that abundance without relational regulation can lead to isolation, avoidance, violence, and the erosion of empathy. In other words, the more our systems prioritize consumption, convenience, and individual comfort over authentic connection and mutual support, the closer we move toward the same collapse Calhoun observed, with a world where the infrastructure for life exists, but the social fabric that makes life meaningful unravels.

Connecting Calhoun's behavioral sink to polyvagal theory reveals why nervous system dysregulation accelerates social collapse. Polyvagal theory explains that our autonomic nervous system governs safety, connection, and survival through three main states: ventral vagal regulation (social engagement, calm connection), sympathetic activation (fight or flight), and dorsal vagal shutdown (freeze, withdrawal). In a balanced community, people cycle adaptively through these states, returning often to ventral vagal safety through co-regulation and supportive relationships. In Calhoun's Universe 25, however, the breakdown of social roles

mirrored what happens when nervous systems lose this regulation. Overcrowding and overstimulation pushed mice into chronic sympathetic stress such as aggression, hypervigilance, territorial defense, or into dorsal vagal collapse such as apathy, isolation, and social withdrawal. Mothers abandoning pups, males becoming violent or passive, and the rise of repetitive, purposeless behaviors all reflect nervous systems stuck in defensive states without opportunities to return to relational safety.

In human societies, global consumption and overregulation of life create similar pressures. People are bombarded by stimulation, social comparison, and economic precarity, leading to chronic sympathetic activation (burnout, rage, polarization) or dorsal vagal shutdown (depression, isolation, ghosting, digital withdrawal). Without widespread cultural practices of co-regulation like attunement, empathy, or collective caregiving, the nervous system cannot stabilize, and entire communities begin to exhibit “behavioral sink” symptoms despite material abundance. This suggests that the real danger is not just overpopulation or consumption, but the erosion of relational and emotional infrastructures that keep nervous systems regulated. Without restoring attachment, attunement, and co-regulation, societies risk collapsing under the weight of their own overstimulation and abundance, exactly as Calhoun’s mice did.



Childism and the Western Crisis of Meaning: A Relational Critique of Cultural Norms

"Everyone talks about peace but no one educates for peace. In this world, they educate for competition, and competition is the beginning of any war. When educating to cooperate and owe each other solidarity, that day we will be educating for peace." -Maria Montessori

Childism can be understood as the foundational prejudice that underpins all other forms of social injustice because it is the first form of oppression nearly every human being encounters. From birth, children are dependent, vulnerable, and subject to the authority of adults. In societies that normalize hierarchy, control, and coercion, children are taught through discipline, neglect, or emotional invalidation and through social hierarchies in the home, at school, and pervading all relationships that power is not relational but dominative, and that their worth is conditional on obedience, productivity, or conformity. This early experience becomes the template for how top-down power structures are replicated and organized at every level of society.

Because children internalize the belief that being small, voiceless, or "less than" justifies mistreatment, they grow into adults who accept and replicate these dynamics in other domains such as patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism, and more. For example, patriarchy mirrors the way boys are socialized to suppress emotions and dominate, while girls are taught to accommodate and serve. Racism, too, relies on infantilizing certain groups, treating them as incapable of self-determination and therefore in need of control. Capitalism builds on childist conditioning by rewarding compliance and punishing resistance, echoing the logic of "good children" versus "bad children." Even the carceral state reproduces the punitive family model, where misbehavior must be met with isolation, fear, and discipline.

In this sense, childism is not just another "ism" but the root schema from which all others grow. It conditions human beings, at their most

formative stage, to accept inequality as natural, to equate authority with domination, and to normalize the exploitation of vulnerability. Until societies dismantle childism by affirming children's full humanity, dignity, and right to co-determination, other forms of injustice will remain cyclical reproductions of the original wound: the denial of relational equality between the powerful and the powerless.

Childhood is not an unchanging biological state, it is a social and cultural construct that varies by region, class, and era. Stephanie Coontz's essay *The Evolution of American Families* (Rutter and Risman, 2015) challenged the nostalgic view of 1950's nuclear families by exploring how social and cultural shifts throughout history have continually reshaped our definitions of relationships and family roles. Her later book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* expand upon these themes and shows how understandings of childhood are constantly shifting throughout history and across various cultures, dispelling the myth of childhood ever having a "golden age." Nostalgia for this nonexistent mythical ideal is seriously problematic because it ignores injustices and inequalities towards children, silences the voices of youth by centering their experiences around adults, and reinforces harmful expectations and behavioral stigmas. Stephen Mintz wrote in his essay *American Childhood as a Social and Cultural Construct* that "post-modern childhood is a product of radical changes in society that led in the space of just over thirty years to the breakdown of dominant norms regarding the family, gender expectations, age, and even reproduction" (Rutter and Risman, p. 61).

The book *History Below the Global* reveals a complex history of power and colonialism while avoiding polarizing and overly simplistic east/west binaries (Kamel, 2024). In colonial America, Eurocentric ideologies were assumed to be objective and universal, and non-European views were dismissed or marginalized. The author believes that this dominant ideology results in a cultural "collective amnesia" and coined the term "Ego-European" (Kamel, p. 15) to describe how Eurocentrism is primarily related to categories of analysis relating to the "process of accumulation" underpinning them. This Ego-European perspective is responsible for shaping Westernized democracy, religion, philosophy, health care, education, the understanding of individual rights, and the norms surrounding Western child rearing practices. The Enlightenment

Age (1685-1815) gave birth to modern ideas of human rights as globalized practices of Social Darwinism (Kamel, p. 27-28; Baxi, 2012). Social Darwinism and Calvinist thought share an emphasis on hierarchy, deterministic worldviews, and moral justifications for systemic and structural inequalities and they strongly reinforced each other throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Mintz writes that our concept of childhood has shifted dramatically in the past few centuries. In the 17th century, children were seen as “adults in training” and adulthood was defined as not a set linear age or time of development, but rather was marked by reaching social milestones and cultural rites of passage such as getting a job or getting married. The 18th century shifted cultural understandings and children were viewed as innocent and fragile. By the end of the 19th century, parents and teachers under the direction of psychologists identified separate, linear phases of development, “discovering” and inventing adolescence (Rutter and Risman, 2015). Valuing children as persons in their own right has not been a priority until very recently. Earlier writings suggest that in ancient Greek and Roman societies, children were servants and considered property of the state, and any person with a mental handicap, deformity or disability was a social embarrassment and was put to death. Historically, the Catholic Church (like much of medieval and early modern Christendom) often interpreted children’s natural behaviors through a theological lens of original sin and moral corruption. Ordinary developmental traits such as impulsivity, curiosity, resistance, and emotional intensity were not seen as stages of growth but as evidence of an inherently unruly or sinful nature.

Behaviors that were particularly targeted included:

- Disobedience or defiance → framed as willful rebellion against divine and parental authority.
- Excessive play, laughter, or imagination → sometimes condemned as idleness, vanity, or openings for demonic influence.
- Anger or strong emotions → interpreted as loss of self-control, a sign of moral weakness or possession.
- Sexual curiosity or exploration → harshly punished as sin, even in very young children, because it was tied to theological fears of lust.

- Questioning authority or doctrine → viewed as heresy, even when expressed innocently by children, and linked to demonic deception.

If parents, educators, or clergy challenged these interpretations and suggested that children's behaviors were natural rather than sinful, they themselves could be accused of heresy, laxity, or collusion with the devil and would risk execution themselves. In practice, this meant that any attempt to defend children's humanity and developmental needs risked being read as an attack on the Church's authority and its theological framing of childhood. Cruel acts ranging from extreme parental indifference and neglect to physical and sexual abuse were considered an adult's right in disciplining a child (Mash and Wolfe, 2019; Academy of Public Policies, 2025). The Massachusetts Stubborn Child Act of 1654 entitled parents to put "stubborn" children to death for misbehaving. We went from killing children to keeping them in cages, then later institutionalizing them. Interest in child behavior didn't really begin historically until the 1800's following Western culture's development of a social conscience. Psychologists such as Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1886-1939) argued at that time that mentally defective children were actually suffering from emotional and behavioral problems mostly caused by inept treatment from adults (CUNY Queens College, 2021; Mash and Wolfe, 2012).

Currently, there are very few official organizations specifically dedicated to the prevention of childhood psychological abuse, and one of the reasons for that may be due to the fact that psychological abuse has been deeply ingrained and normalized in American culture. Daniel Kline argued that Western society subjects' children to three forms of psychological violence that are typically ignored: expectations that push children beyond their social, physical and psychological capabilities as an expression of adult needs, labeling their behavior as pathological, and representations of children in the media, where they are objectified and targeted as consumers to be exploited (Rutter and Risan, 2015, p. 65).

As mentioned earlier in the book, Mary Ainsworth conducted early experiments on childhood attachment in Africa but was unable to replicate the results with American babies because Western child rearing practices normalize avoidant attachment. A child who is not afraid to trigger their parents with their behavior likely has secure attachment,

whereas a child who is afraid of their parent's reactions will have a brain and nervous system oriented on seeking safety. These early experiences shape later adult behaviors. John Bowlby primarily developed his attachment theory when he published a paper titled "The Nature of the Child's Tie to his mother" (1958), defining a secure base as a presence that provides a sense of safety to another, allowing for mutual and individual exploration. He said that two things are needed for secure attachment: being consistently and lovingly responsive to each other's physical, social, and emotional needs, and engagement in mutually enjoyable interactions. When these two needs are not met, insecure attachments and unhealthy relationship dynamics will develop. However, society has clung to its outdated attitudes towards children and their behavior, refusing to let go of their dire pessimism, hostility, and disdain.

Disagreement remains as to what constitutes normal and abnormal. According to the textbook, *Abnormal Child Psychology* by Eric Mash and David Wolfe (2012), no simple straightforward answers exist, and establishing boundaries between normal and abnormal is an arbitrary process at best because our understandings and guidelines are constantly shifting with new information. Their book endorses development of a Biopsychosocial model that balances cultural factors such as the family, peer group, and school with the long-standing medical views of behavior as disorderly. These attitudes signify a paradigm shift from seeing children and persons with disabilities as objects to seeing them as persons with human rights (Mash and Wolfe, 2019).

Considering what we now know about attachment and the fact that neuroplasticity guarantees lifelong adaptive structural and functional changes to the brain, it would make more sense to develop a cross-cultural biopsychosocial model that views human development as dynamic and constantly changing, instead of linear and static. A more humane framework for assisting persons in need of additional support would result in destigmatizing childhood and the messy process of being a human. This would ultimately create a cultural shift towards viewing all behavior as communication of unmet needs, seeing each person as equally deserving and placing value on their individual strengths instead of using arbitrary means to classify, pathologize and stigmatize the ways that our various collective traumas manifest themselves individually.

Culture is a learned, shared, integrated behavior. When people or groups of people do not share the same culture, cultural miscommunication can occur, such as committing some sort of cultural taboo. The pathologization of behavior directly relates to the differences between childhood culture and adult culture, particularly when Egoic-European adults center their own experiences and lack a subjective understanding of the differences between bottom up as opposed to top-down processing. Misunderstandings are often used in instances of power imbalance intentionally by the dominant individuals to intentionally reinforce cultural norms. This reinforces ideologies and maintains the existing power structures, which perpetuate the social inequalities for members of the human species who deviate from dominant cultural norms, such as children.

Child culture can be simplified as essentially being grounded in bottom up, emotional processing. Children experience and express their emotions directly from their bodies and nervous systems due to lacking the layers of cognitive processing and social conditioning that adults have acquired over time. Both the polyvagal and the limbic systems are directly expressed in a deeply embodied form of behavior, reflecting what is felt in the moment without filters. Bottom-up processing directly shapes child culture as relational and intuitive. Adult culture is shaped by top-down emotional processing which inhibits feelings through higher order cognitive functioning such as rationalizing, conformity to social expectations and cultural norms, and matured communication skills. This usually disconnects them from what they feel and how they express that to others. When adult culture stresses emotional suppression over integration, the behavioral patterns of emotional avoidance, dissociation, and inability to attune in relationship to others become normalized and culturally reinforced. Because top-down processing is rule bound, hierarchical and focused on control, it causes adults to engage in childism, or the systemic devaluation of children's needs, perspectives, and rights. An inherent part of top-down adult culture is viewing children's own culture and bottom-up emotional expressions as being immature, irrational, and undesirable, which causes grown-ups to view developmentally appropriate behavior as "misbehaving" and deserving of punishment or coercive controls. Childism as an extension of Ego-Europeanism leads to projection, projection leads to relational exile, exile

reinforces fear, and fear fortifies the ego's need to divide. It becomes a self-perpetuating loop of fragmentation; personally, socially, structurally, and culturally.

In childhood, it is necessary for caregivers to emotionally attune so the children can learn to regulate their own nervous system and fully individuate as a developed human being. When a child grows up in an environment that lacks attunement, their nervous system fragments and the child's physiological states (fight, flight, freeze, fawn) become disconnected rather than fully integrated. This often leads to later diagnosis of mental illness and/or behavioral disorders in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. These symptoms are frequently reinforced by Ego-European norms and Western hyper-individualism. The concept of accountability as understood in Western culture is deeply embedded in systems of control, punishment, and individualism. Cartesian dualism, the Protestant work ethic, and colonial legal systems have all contributed to accountability being used as a mechanism of social control through moral individualism, where blame is assigned to an individual for violating rules or norms, and personal responsibility is centered as a moral imperative regardless of context. The pathologization of arrested development into separate diagnoses removes this added context and shifts the blame for atypical behaviors off of the system where it actually belongs.

Capitalism relies on fear and the pathologization of behavior to maintain systemic controls. B.F. Skinner and John B. Watson believed that forcibly controlling a child's environment could shape their behavior, and pioneered the field of Behaviorism, which institutionalized childism by creating a socially sanctioned foundation for children being culturally viewed as objects to be manipulated, as opposed to independent actors with their own autonomy and agency. Because behaviorism is based in childism and a belief in adult superiority, it manifests all three forms of Daniel Klein's hidden childhood psychological violence, and thus is inherently traumatizing and extremely psychologically abusive. Techniques like punishment and positive reinforcement force conformity and compliance to adult expectations by exerting external controls as opposed to gently guiding and fostering a child's innate internal understanding.

If we all saw behavior as meaningful, relational data and a language of unmet needs, then punishment, blame, and even most forms of “accountability” would collapse, as would our hierarchical understanding of respect as deference. Those qualities arise as inherent features of a system that moralizes behavior into good/bad binaries which divorce content from context. For instance, narcissistic traits, such as a lack of empathy, poor self-regulation, and impaired social skills, are not fixed personality characteristics but rather adaptive responses to unmet developmental needs in childhood. When these early stages of emotional and social development are revisited and nurtured in adulthood through attunement and safe connections combined with self-awareness, these traits can diminish, showing that what modern culture views as character or personality is actually quite malleable and able to shift over time.

If the good/bad binary collapsed and behavior were instead understood as meaningful, relational data, a language of unmet needs, then respect could no longer be defined as deference to authority or compliance with imposed standards. Respect would shift from being vertical and hierarchical to being horizontal and reciprocal. It would mean acknowledging the humanity, emotions, and needs behind another’s behavior, even when that behavior is disruptive or difficult. In this reframing, respect is not earned by obedience or demanded through power; it is cultivated through presence, curiosity, and responsiveness.

For example, instead of respecting a teacher simply because of their position, students would respect them because the teacher demonstrates care, attunement, and consistency in meeting relational needs. Similarly, parents would not demand respect as unquestioned authority but would embody respect by listening to and validating their children’s perspectives, modeling the very qualities they hope to see returned. In social institutions, respect would no longer mean conformity to rules but honoring the dignity, context, and needs of each person. In short, respect would be redefined as mutual recognition of one another’s full humanity, an active process of listening, empathizing, and supporting the conditions for relational safety and growth. Rather than being a top-down expectation, it becomes a shared responsibility, grounded not in fear or hierarchy, but in interdependence.

Richard A. Barrett states in his book *Culture and Conduct: An Excursion in Anthropology* that culture is the shared systems of meaning that serve as principles and as guides for behavior, “a complex set of rules, norms, and principles that serve as generalized guides for action” (Barrett, p. 62) which makes it possible for individuals within a society to interact with each other with a certain degree of predictability. Culture, simply put, is a set of socialized expectations for the behavior of others. Members within a dominant culture become so unconsciously accustomed to these unspoken cultural rules that when others deviate from social norms, the uncertainty instills fear and can make them think their lives, not just the cultural standards, are genuinely being threatened. “A social system is similar to this” (Barrett, p. 63).

Barrett’s definition of culture as a shared system of meanings and rules that guide behavior links directly to the autistic experience. Autism is often characterized not by an absence of social ability but by a different relationship to these unspoken cultural rules. Neurotypical members of a dominant culture become so accustomed to predictable social cues like eye contact, small talk, or tone of voice that when an autistic person communicates differently, the deviation can provoke discomfort, fear, or even hostility. For the autistic individual, who may not intuitively absorb or prioritize these “generalized guides for action,” their natural ways of expressing themselves are perceived as violations of culture rather than valid forms of communication. This dynamic helps explain the “double empathy problem,” it is not that autistic people inherently lack understanding, but that cultural systems are built on neuronormative expectations that treat difference as threat. In this way, autism exposes the fragility of cultural predictability, showing how deeply society relies on conformity to sustain its sense of safety, and how quickly fear arises when those implicit rules are not followed.

A subjective approach is critical to anthropologists because culture and social systems are full of “symbolic meanings and shared understandings.” This subjective point of view requires viewing behavior internally, “as part of the logical, meaningful order of the actors in any particular society” (Barrett, p. 125). The author goes on to explain that the job of an anthropologist is to “attempt to penetrate the mental world” of cultural actors when studying their behavior (Barrett, p. 128). Once we understand the beliefs driving the behaviors, then the practices and

habits the actors express follow the beliefs logically. Behavior, then, is typically the socialized and culturally sanctioned means that an actor employs to meet their needs. “Once the underlying premises are understood, the practices appear reasonable...the attempt to understand a people by uncovering the thoughts that lie behind their actions can yield important insights” (Barrett, p. 129). Durkheim pointed out the complex symbolical codes behind the regulation of behavior and stressed the importance of taking a subjective point of view to analyze it when he noted that Australian aborigines’ religious views were best viewed not as individual, separate beliefs but as a “wordless language of symbolic acts” (Barrett, p. 136; Durkheim, 2019). As opposed to decoding belief systems, Durkheim felt that “decoding the messages about society” expressed by behaviors is far more important and meaningful. “Enhanced awareness of symbolical meaning can emerge from detailed analysis,” Barrett concurs (pg. 139) and says that assuming a broader perspective than that of any of the actors involved allows for connections and meanings to become apparent to the observer.

Ego-European perspectives see maladaptive behaviors as sin, pathologize normal reactions to abnormal circumstances without considering additional context, and through a lens of fear view individual self-protective tendencies as aggression. Western moral binaries currently shame emotions through behavioral stigmas and stunt human empathy by elevating logic, reason and the material realm over feeling, intuition, spirit and the unquantifiable. Fortunately, the culture around parenting has been shifting lately to become more relational and less transactional. Western culture and society teach through insecure attachment and the normalized avoidance discovered by Mary Ainsworth that love is conditional and only a reward for desirable behavior. The modern trends of Attachment Parenting, Gentle Parenting and Responsive Parenting seek to change this perspective.

What would the world look like if behavior was culturally understood as a language and read as communication without moralizing? If we were taught from an early age to take a subjective approach to the behavior of others, seeing it not as evidence of defect but instead of missing attunement and connection, we could fundamentally shift our world from one of judgment to understanding. People would no longer mistake hurt for harm, unusual or atypical behaviors would no longer be seen negatively

but would be viewed as a natural reflection of systemic destabilization, and the dysregulation would be met with curiosity, presence and care. Our modern concept of childhood would go from being linear and defined by false binaries of “normal” or “typical,” and we would instead view each individual as developing fluidly in their own time and space based on their separate needs and backgrounds rather than trying to measure everyone through universally applied measurements. Perhaps most significantly, our definition of adulthood would shift socially to be understood as not better than children but equal to, encompassing the continuing phase of human development. The term “grown up” becomes outdated in a culture that embraces growth and development as a culturally co-creative, continual process that never truly ends. Instead, significant rites of passage could be adopted to denote earned privileges based on the acquisition of knowledge and skills that occur outside of artificially imposed, one-size-fits-none timeframes.

Because childhood is not an unchanging biological state but a social and cultural construct, the ways that we come to view childhood in the future could shift just as dramatically as it has before in the historical past. Using a relational and trauma informed lens rooted in Indigenous justice models, restorative practices, and polyvagal-informed communication, this could look more like seeing children as autonomous individuals deserving of their own protected human rights, understanding behavior as communication (especially when dysregulated), recognizing impact without moralizing intention, creating space for repair instead of retribution, balancing individual responsibility with collective healing, and honoring nervous system states with relational context.

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So when a child acts impulsively or struggles with big feelings, it’s not defiance — it’s development.

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Calm guidance today builds the brain for tomorrow.

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The Deficit Delusion: How Discontinuous Development Theories Pathologize Neurodivergence and Undermine Human Potential

"Thinking is difficult, therefore let the herd pronounce judgment." -
Carl Gustav Jung, from "Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen
in the Skies"

Diana Lang wrote that human development is studied by multiple disciplines, which all contribute to our cultural knowledge regarding individual and group development, health and wellbeing. "This type of course is offered in some schools as psychology (particularly as developmental psychology); in other schools, it is taught under sociology, human development, or family studies." (Lang, 2022, p. 5) The field of human development comprises contributions from research across multiple intersecting areas of study including but not limited to anthropology, biology, gerontology, psychology, sociology, nutrition and health care among others. Our understanding of the ways that people change and what they are capable of achieving during their lifespan is shaped by academia's collaborative effort to understand how and why these changes occur. One of the ways that psychology attempts to determine human development is through the longstanding nature vs. nurture debate, which posits biology and genetics against our environment and culture, but I believe this creates a false binary that ignores the deeper interconnective interactions of both nature and nurture. For instance, "our unique experiences in our environment influence whether and how particular traits are expressed, and at the same time, our genes influence how we interact with our environment," (Lang, 2022, p. 8). Early experiences influence both gene expression and brain development (Wolfe & Mash, 1999). The DSM-5 now recognizes that traditional diagnostic labels may not be helpful for trauma and stressor related disorders regarding child maltreatment which are relational in nature and socially transmitted

(Wolfe & Mash, preface). The nature vs. nurture debate continues as psychologists attempt to determine which contributions matter more and by what amount, but this conflict largely bypasses acknowledgement of the reciprocal relationship between both and the mediating relational and social component between them.

A real-life example of the interaction between nature and nurture can be seen in childhood language development. A child may be born with a genetic predisposition for strong verbal ability, but whether that potential fully develops depends heavily on their environment. If the child grows up in a home rich with conversation, storytelling, and reading, those genetic strengths are activated and refined, allowing them to excel in communication. On the other hand, if the child grows up in an environment with limited verbal interaction or chronic stress, the same genetic potential may remain underdeveloped. At the same time, the child's natural curiosity and temperament, shaped by their biology, also influence how they engage with their environment, perhaps prompting them to seek out books, songs, or conversations. This example shows how nature and nurture continually shape one another rather than functioning as separate, opposing forces.

Anthropological approaches tend to recognize shared aspects of human development, behavior and distress across cultures globally, indicating commonalities in coping and meaning making. The field of anthropology provides critical insight to the impact that culture has on the ways we understand and treat mental health. Leighton and Hughes discussed culture as being causative of mental disorders (2005) as did Good (1997). Hagen and Barrett's research support an evolutionary theory of psychic pain that manifests through individual pathology (2007, 2011). These studies and numerous others like them discredit Western deficit based psychiatric pathologies and discontinuous psychological theories, instead framing mental illness and behavioral disorders as evolutionary mechanisms that are adaptive responses to adversity which function as cultural mechanisms. One example of this is autism, which continues to increase in prevalence due to modern social structures (Fein, 2015). Western hyper-individualism and the voluntaristic, preference driven nature of social interactions amongst Americans reinforces cycles of social incompetence and escalates distress amongst those already vulnerable to social difficulties. In a society based on deficit models which assume that

the only meaningful and acceptable social behavior conforms to cultural norms and expectations regarding pre-established linear stages of development (Grinker, 2010). The rigid boundaries regarding social interactions that are imposed on autistics through neurotypical frameworks largely ignore the relational depth and heightened environmental sensitivity that are characteristic of autism (Eddings Prince, 2010). Anthropologists have determined that autistic individuals have their own unique culture which includes shared practices, discourse, and cultural artifacts that reinforce a collective identity (Bagatell, 2010). Ian Hacking's theory that psychiatric categories interact with social institutions to shape identities in dynamic ways has been supported by other studies which found that psychiatric diagnoses are culturally and historically contingent rather than purely medical constructs (Grinker & Cho, 2013).

Social deficits are a core characteristic of ASD, characterized by difficulties in understanding, interpreting, and responding to social cues and engaging in reciprocal social interactions (American Psychiatric Association, 2024; Wolfe & Mash, 155-193). But the only reason autistic behaviors and social skills are considered deficient in our culture is because they don't fit with dominant narratives based on discontinuous developmental theories, which provide the foundational framework for Western psychology and psychiatry. Prior to the 18th century, children's mental health problems were rarely mentioned in professional settings, and the Massachusetts Stubborn Child Act of 1654 permitted children to be put to death by their parents for misbehaving. Into the mid 1800's, specific laws allowed children with developmental disabilities to be kept in cages (Wolfe & Mash, p. 4). The term moral insanity was used by Benjamin Rush (1745-1813) to describe nonintellectual forms of abnormal child behavior (Wolfe & Mash, p. 5). The Western understanding of autism as a social deficit has been significantly shaped by these earlier cultural attitudes around childism, which are rooted in expectations of conformity to very rigid neurotypical behavioral norms (Snow, 2025).

One of my primary issues in general with the field of psychology is that it is largely based on discontinuous development theory, which believes that development occurs in a linear fashion during specific ages and stages, whereas theories based on continuous development believe that there is a progressive and cumulative process of growth which occurs throughout one's lifetime and where existing skills are gradually

improved upon. Theorists such as Erikson who studied psychosocial development, and Piaget who focused on cognitive development in childhood, are foundational to our understanding of human development, but both of their theories are discontinuous stage-based models that present development in a linear fashion (Lang, p. 66-71; 85-92). Freud's psychodynamic theories of personality and the self as well as psychosexual development were all discontinuous (Wolfe & Mash, p. 7-8; Lang, 54-60). Other psychologists considered fundamental to the field of psychology whose theories were discontinuous include Kohlberg, whose concepts of Moral Development were founded on Piaget's discontinuous cognitive stages. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is also discontinuous (Lang, p.96-98) because people do not always progress through the levels in a neat, linear fashion. Basic needs like safety or food might be unmet, yet individuals may still pursue love, creativity, or self-actualization. Likewise, meeting higher needs does not permanently secure them; people often move back and forth between levels depending on life circumstances. This makes the hierarchy more fluid and dynamic than the rigid pyramid model suggests.

Psychology overall as a field of study has a significant foundation in discontinuous theory, which is incredibly problematic because a belief in development as static and linear has resulted in the development of a deficit model for understanding and treating mental and behavioral health, which views issues as individual dysfunctions or deficiencies. People are categorized and pathologized based on symptoms that are viewed as deficiencies, but there is an ongoing debate as to whether or not the current model is an accurate reflection of mental health, because this field is increasingly being understood as continuous and dynamic (Dalglish et al., 2020; Anglin & Polanco-Roman, 2017). In contrast, a continuous view of mental health leads to a reduction in stigmatization and pathologization (Molnar, 2023). The concept of mental health existing on a spectrum or continuum, with varying degrees of health and distress, is acknowledged in recently developed models like the Mental Health Continuum Model (MHCM) which aligns with a continuous perspective (Government of Canada, 2023). A continuous view of mental health avoids the traps of stigmatization and pathologization because it recognizes that everyone moves along a spectrum of well-being and distress rather than dividing people into "healthy" versus "disordered." This

perspective normalizes fluctuations in mental states as part of the human experience, reducing the sense of otherness attached to diagnoses. By framing mental health as dynamic and shared, it emphasizes support and prevention over labeling, allowing for a fuller, more compassionate understanding of psychological well-being.

Human development and behavior do not occur in isolation, and multiple factors including economic, political, cultural and social are now recognized as significant influences on individual life outcomes (Lang, p. 15). Paul Baltes' lifespan perspective is both continuous and discontinuous in that it acknowledges multidimensionality and views development as lifelong and occurring in both gradual incremental ways as well as in distinct stages (Lang, p. 29-42). Baltes also considered the impact socioeconomic status (SES) and culture both have on development and behavior, which I have previously explored (Snow, 2024). Social theories of mental health typically favor continuous development and utilize multidimensional understandings such as spectrums to replace outdated categorical models (Zarrella et. al, 2017). Bandura's social learning theory (SCT or SLT) is considered continuous, and emphasizes gradual ongoing learning through social interaction (Lang, p. 81-84). Roger's humanistic theory, which focused on an inherent lifelong tendency towards growth and self-actualization, is also fluid and continuous (Lang, p. 93-95). Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory was produced "as a reaction to existing conflicting approaches in psychology" and emphasized the importance of culture and social interaction for the development of cognitive abilities (Lang, p. 101-102). He believed that through guided participation known as scaffolding through a respected mentor, individuals can learn skills within their zones of proximal development. His ideas of learning driving development as opposed to capabilities of learning being determined by the developmental stage of the learner fundamentally shifted our understanding of the learning process and changed our views of development from discontinuous and linear to continuous and lifelong. Urie Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory has been particularly impactful on my previous research and personal theoretical development and has explained how the natural environment impacts human growth and development, while recognizing biological potential as being realized through social and environmental factors (Lang, p. 104-107).

The environment shapes human development by acting as the context in which biological potential is either nurtured or suppressed. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, multiple layers of environment, from immediate family and peers to broader cultural and societal structures, interact with an individual's biology over time. For example, a child may carry genetic traits that predispose them to high intellectual ability, but whether those traits manifest depends on whether the environment provides safety, stimulation, and supportive relationships. Stressful or deprived conditions can limit neural development and alter gene expression through processes like epigenetics, while nurturing environments can trigger latent capacities by promoting growth and resilience. This explains why genetic traits are expressed differently depending on environmental context. A predisposition toward anxiety might remain dormant in a secure, supportive setting but become pronounced in an environment marked by instability or trauma. Similarly, a genetic inclination for musical ability might only emerge if the child has access to instruments and encouragement. These examples demonstrate that development is not nature versus nurture but a dynamic interplay of both. Exploring this "third option" means understanding human growth as an ongoing dialogue between biology and environment, where genes set potentials, and environments shape how and whether those potentials are realized.

Relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are (Siegel, 1999). Looking closely at the history of psychology, a clear pattern emerges where earlier theorists produced discontinuous, linear and rigid frameworks; it wasn't until the emergence of a social conscience (Wolfe & Mash, p. 4) along with the inclusion of social and relational dimensions that psychologists began to accept more dynamic, fluid and continuous constructs and explanations. From this information we can conclude two things with a fair amount of certainty: 1) the current Western biomedical model is flawed and outdated, and 2) a newer biopsychosocial framework with cross cultural applications that emphasizes a strong social component is greatly needed in America today.

Recursive Repair: Rethinking Narcissism, Trauma, and the Brain's Capacity to Heal Itself

"You are not toxic...you're responding to relational trauma. And trauma heals through relationships." -unknown

Abstract:

This essay challenges the prevailing psychological narrative that views narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) as a fixed and toxic trait. Instead, it introduces a trauma-informed, relational, and neurobiological framework that reinterprets narcissistic behaviors as recursive attempts at emotional repair. Drawing on neuroscience, particularly findings that adult neurons revert to embryonic states to regenerate, the essay proposes that the human psyche similarly regresses in response to developmental trauma, not as pathology, but as an adaptive mechanism seeking integration. Through this lens, narcissistic traits are understood as delayed expressions of unmet attachment needs that can be healed through co-regulation and safe relational experiences. The essay critiques linear, deficit-based models of development and reframes healing as a non-linear, recursive, and culturally responsive process. By extending and decolonizing Jungian psychology, and incorporating emerging theories of non-linear time, it calls for a shift from moral judgment to compassionate curiosity, offering a radical rethinking of how we understand and heal relational trauma.

Thesis:

The modern diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is not a fixed pathology but a culturally constructed misreading of delayed developmental repair triggered by complex trauma. Rather than viewing narcissistic behaviors as irredeemably "toxic," we must recognize them as recursive attempts at healing, where the adult brain, like injured

neurons, returns to an earlier state to complete emotional and relational development that was interrupted. Neuroscience, sociology, and trauma-informed theory together support a continuous, relational model of human development, which affirms that even the most stigmatized behaviors can be understood and healed through co-regulation, attunement, and safe connection.

I. The Myth of Toxic Permanence: Narcissism as Delayed Development

Western psychology has historically relied on discontinuous, linear models of development, pathologizing behaviors that deviate from these timelines. As I argued in *Childism* and the Deficit Delusion, the foundational flaw lies in “deficit-based models that emphasize control, regulation, and fixed stages,” which ignore the dynamic and recursive nature of human development.

Narcissistic traits such as a lack of empathy, control-seeking, or emotional dysregulation are often moralized and labeled as fixed aspects of personality. But what if these behaviors are not signs of inherent toxicity, but of a psyche attempting to rewind and repair?

In trauma-informed theory, emotional dysregulation is a survival mechanism. Children who grow up without attuned caregivers often fail to complete key stages of emotional and social development. As adults, these unmet needs reappear not as pathology, but as attempts at recursive resolution. Narcissistic defenses, in this view, are developmental echoes, or fragments of a nervous system that never had the chance to integrate.

II. Recursion and the Brain: Returning to the Beginning to Regenerate

UC San Diego’s 2020 study *When Damaged, the Adult Brain Repairs Itself by Going Back to the Beginning* provides striking biological evidence for this theory. Researchers found that when adult neurons are injured, they revert to an embryonic state in order to regenerate new connections. According to lead researcher Dr. Mark Tuszynski:

“The brain’s ability to repair or replace itself is not limited...when an adult brain cell is injured, it reverts to an embryonic cortical neuron. In this far less mature state, it can now regrow axons.”

This finding radically challenges the outdated idea that adult brain development is fixed. It also directly supports the notion that psychological and relational trauma in adults may invoke a similar reversion and a return to early, immature relational behaviors not as regression, but as an opportunity for healing.

Narcissistic traits, then, are not signs of a broken personality. They are the nervous system's recursive attempt to resolve a developmental interruption. And just like the regenerative transcriptome identified in the study, healing is possible, but only under the right relational conditions.

III. Trauma Is Not Toxicity: Healing Through Recursive Relationships

“You are not toxic, it's a trauma response in relationships, and it can be healed through relationships.”

This phrase distills a powerful truth: trauma is not permanent. But healing doesn't happen in isolation. The adult nervous system can only repair what was damaged through safe relational experiences. Just as neurons require an “encouraging environment for regrowth,” people need co-regulation, not condemnation.

In my earlier essays *Childism* and *The Deficit Delusion*, I called for replacing moralistic frameworks with continuous, culturally responsive biopsychosocial models. Rather than treating behaviors as inherent defects, we must understand them as embodied communications of unmet needs. Narcissistic behaviors often stem from early attachment disruptions and emotional neglect, yet rather than receive empathy and repair, individuals displaying these behaviors are often discarded, vilified, and exiled.

This is not healing. This is re-traumatization.

A real-life example of early attachment disruption and emotional neglect might be a child who grows up in a home where their physical needs are fully met, such as food on the table, clothes on their back, and a roof over their head, but their emotional world is consistently ignored. When the child expresses sadness, fear, or anger, the parent responds with dismissal, irritation, or silence rather than comfort and attunement. Over time, the child learns that showing vulnerability only leads to rejection,

so they build defenses by hiding their feelings, exaggerating their strengths, or seeking approval through performance and achievement. As an adult, these defenses can manifest as narcissistic behaviors, including needing constant validation, avoiding intimacy, or reacting harshly to criticism. Yet when such behaviors are met with condemnation or abandonment, the person relives the original wound of being unseen and unloved in their vulnerability. What they need is repair, empathetic recognition of the pain driving the behavior, rather than further exile.

IV. The Harm of Linear, Deficit-Based Models

Dominant psychiatric frameworks often promote a discontinuous view of mental health, where behaviors are assessed based on rigid expectations tied to age, stage, and social conformity. But this binary of “normal vs. disordered” collapses under the lens of trauma-informed neurobiology.

We now know that:

Neuroplasticity allows the brain to reorganize throughout life.

Recursive healing mirrors the way neurons regenerate by returning to embryonic states.

Attachment trauma disrupts development but can be repaired through safe, attuned relationships.

Yet outdated psychological models treat these recursive behaviors as permanent traits rather than adaptive responses. This is where cultural narratives, especially in Western hyper-individualist societies, become complicit in the ongoing pathologization of relational wounds.

As I argued in the earlier essay:

“What modern culture views as character or personality is actually quite malleable and able to shift over time.”

V. From Pathology to Possibility: A Recursive Biopsychosocial Model

To move beyond the moralization of trauma, we must shift from deficit to recursive biopsychosocial models. These frameworks recognize that:

Development is continuous, not linear.

Behavior is communication, not pathology.

The nervous system repairs through co-regulation, not isolation.

Relationships are the environment for regeneration.

In this model, narcissistic traits are understood not as symptoms to be eradicated but signals to be interpreted with care. Healing occurs when people are supported in safely revisiting and resolving early wounds, not punished for expressing them.

Conclusion: Recursive Hope

If we allowed narcissism to be viewed not as a moral failing but as a recursive cry for relational repair, what kind of world might we create? One where behavior is read as language, where shame is replaced with curiosity, and where healing is seen as a continuous process embedded in safe connection.

The adult brain, like the injured neuron, knows how to heal.

But it must be given the environment to do so.

An environment that allows narcissism to be understood as a cry for relational repair would be one designed around safety, empathy, and consistent presence rather than judgment or punishment. This kind of environment would normalize seeing behavior as communication and cultivate curiosity about the unmet needs beneath defenses. It would prioritize secure, non-coercive relationships where vulnerability is met with attunement, not rejection.

In practical terms, such an environment looks like communities and families where emotional expression is welcomed, repair is prioritized

over blame, and mistakes are treated as opportunities for growth. It involves spaces where boundaries are respected without withdrawing love, where accountability is practiced through dialogue and empathy rather than exile, and where relational safety makes it possible to risk authenticity. On a broader scale, institutions like schools, workplaces, and healthcare systems would adopt trauma-informed and relationally centered approaches that replace shame with compassion and rigid rules with flexibility.

In short, this environment looks like a culture of co-regulation; where individuals are consistently reminded, through experience, that they are safe, valued, and capable of growth. Just as an injured neuron repairs itself when placed in the right biochemical conditions, the adult brain and heart can repair themselves when immersed in relationships that offer trust, patience, and care.

This model of recursive repair not only challenges the dominant psychiatric paradigms; it also offers a vital extension to Jungian psychology. While Jung centered his theories around timeless archetypes and individual introspection, this work reinterprets psychological healing as a developmental, relational, and neurobiological process. Jung's view of narcissism as an ego-inflated block to individuation is transformed here: narcissistic behaviors are not fixed moral failings but recursive attempts by the nervous system to complete interrupted development. Where Jung saw individuation as a solitary confrontation with the unconscious, recursive repair reframes healing as co-regulation, a collective journey through relational safety. Shadow work is no longer merely symbolic, it becomes somatic, interpersonal, and biologically rooted. Archetypes become dynamic developmental states, not static myths. The wounded child is not just a metaphor; it is a neurological reality that can be reentered and repaired.

This shift also brings a decolonial and trauma-informed lens to Jungian frameworks. Rather than universalizing the psyche through Eurocentric myths, this approach recognizes how cultural trauma, moralized diagnoses, and hyper-individualist norms distort our understanding of human behavior. Narcissism, in this view, is often a survival strategy in a relationally starved culture, not a pathology to be exiled. Healing requires not judgment, but connection, not diagnosis, but curiosity.

Emerging research on "negative time" (the possibility of time flowing from the future to the past) suggests that healing may not be strictly linear. Like the nervous system's recursive return to earlier states for repair, consciousness itself may operate across non-linear temporal dimensions, allowing future safety to rewire past trauma through relational experiences in the present. By rooting psychological development in neuroplasticity, relational neuroscience, and recursive repair, we not only update Jung, we liberate his legacy from moralism and myth, grounding it in the body's inherent capacity to heal in relationship.

This idea of healing as non-linear and recursive connects deeply to the autistic experience. Autistic people often revisit earlier developmental states throughout life, not as regression but as a natural process of repair and integration. In a culture that misreads these behaviors as pathology, the deeper truth is overlooked: the autistic nervous system may embody the very principle of non-linear healing, moving fluidly between past and present states to create continuity and safety. If we integrate emerging research on "negative time" with relational neuroscience, autism can be understood not as a fixed deviation from typical development but as a consciousness attuned to cyclical, recursive patterns rather than linear progressions. The reframing positions autistic traits as evidence of the nervous system's capacity to access and reconfigure earlier states in response to present relational safety. In this way, autistic embodiment illuminates the very principle that I am describing here: that healing does not move forward in a straight line, but loops back through time, repairing ruptures and weaving new coherence. Autistic experience, then, becomes not a deficit but a lived demonstration of the nervous system's timeless capacity for recursive repair.

Midlife Crisis Reframed as Recursive Healing from Childhood Trauma

The widely accepted notion of the “midlife crisis” portrays individuals, especially men, in their 40’s or 50’s undergoing a period of instability which is marked by impulsive decisions, existential despair, and irrational behavior. This narrative, popularized by self-help books, pop psychology culture and mainstream media, rests on a shaky foundation of anecdote, stereotype, and outdated psychological models. Midlife crisis has become a caricature of itself, and evidence of this stereotype can be found in films such as the 40-year-old Virgin (Apatow, 2005) and American Beauty (Mendes, 1999) and television sitcoms like Man Down (Davies & Lipsey, 2013-2017). However, emerging trauma-informed and neurobiological research suggests that what we label as a “midlife crisis” may instead be the adult nervous system’s recursive attempt to heal unresolved developmental trauma from childhood, adding substantial credibility to the view of human development as fluid, recursive and continuous, rather than linear and discontinuous.

This paper challenges the myth of the midlife crisis as a universal, age bound stage and reframes it as recursive healing, which is a neurobiological and relational process triggered by conditions of emotional safety that allow the psyche to revisit and complete interrupted stages of development (UCSD, 2020). This phenomenon of negative time is not unique to humans and has been discovered in the world of physics as well (Sanusha, 2025). Midlife in particular appears to be connected recursively to adolescence. The term is originally from feminist analysis but was co-opted by patriarchal narrative. The label of “crisis” refers to gendered expectations and cultural biases as opposed to reality. The concept is a social construct (Schmidt, 2020).

In this context, negative time refers to the possibility that healing and development do not always move in a forward, linear progression, but can circle back so that the present and future reshape the meaning of the past. It describes how the nervous system, when given conditions of

emotional safety, can re-enter earlier developmental states in order to repair wounds that were never resolved. Instead of being locked into the timeline of “what happened” in childhood, the psyche draws on present relational experiences such as therapy, nurturing relationships, or self-awareness to rewire old neural pathways. In this way, the future (a safer present or anticipated future stability) “flows backward” to transform the past, allowing ruptures in attachment and development to be revisited and healed. Negative time here is not about reversing chronological time, but about recognizing that consciousness and neurobiology operate recursively, where earlier unfinished experiences can be integrated later in life through conditions of safety and relational repair.

The cultural myth of the midlife crisis initially formed in the late 20th century, gaining credibility and mainstream popularity through Gail Sheehy's influential book *Passages* (1989), which suggested predictable age-based crises. Schmidt (2020) shows how its popularization was shaped by gender politics, collective trauma narratives, and cultural attitudes. Media depictions portrayed middle aged men as experiencing dramatic breakdowns triggered by aging, family life, or the pressures of masculinity. These stories often reinforce gendered assumptions, particularly the idea that men equate aging with loss of vitality, attractiveness, personal power or control. Self-help literature and advice columns further perpetuate this myth, treating midlife crisis as a normal and expected psychological phase. This cultural saturation lends the illusion of universality, despite a lack of empirical evidence.

The endurance of the midlife crisis myth can be attributed to several interlocking sources:

1) Misapplied Psychoanalytic Theory, where Freudian and post-Freudian models framed development as a series of fixed stages. Deviations from these stages are currently interpreted as pathology.

2) Cultural Stereotypes and Confirmation Bias, where popular anecdotes and selective memory reinforce this myth. Individuals tend to remember stories that conform to the crisis narrative, and ignore those that don't.

3) Gendered Social Norms, where societal expectations around masculinity, productivity, and aging predispose men to interpret emotional

unrest through a lens of personal failure and crisis, rather than as invitations to self-inquiry and deeper integration.

Instead of viewing midlife distress as a predictable response to age, trauma informed theory proves that midlife can be a portal for powerful recursive healing. Earlier papers that Snow has written on human behavior, developmental traumas, recursive healing, childism and narcissism (Snow, 2024; 2025) have explored how narcissistic or dysregulated behaviors emerging in adulthood are not signs of toxicity but reflect “delayed developmental repair triggered by relational complex trauma.” The adult brain, like the injured neuron, has the capacity to return to earlier developmental states emotionally, cognitively, and relationally in order to heal what was previously interrupted. This model finds neurobiological support in a 2020 UC San Diego study, which found that adult neurons revert to an embryonic state when damaged, enabling regeneration (UCSD, 2020). Snow drew parallels between this regenerative process and the adult psyche's regression to early attachment patterns, interpreting it not as pathology but as a biologically embedded bid for healing through connection and relational attunement.

There is also compelling earlier evidence against the midlife crisis as a universal pathology; recent empirical studies challenge the age-based deterministic framework of midlife crisis. Brennan et al. (2023) conducted a longitudinal analysis (Dunedin cohort) demonstrating that midlife despair correlates more strongly with adolescent psychopathology than with age. The study highlights that unresolved trauma and early mental health challenges manifest later in life under allowable conditions, but these experiences are not determined by age. Lachman (2004) reviewed cross-sectional and longitudinal research that contradicts the crisis narrative, emphasizing resilience, increased cognitive flexibility, and meaning making as typical midlife experiences. Lachman proved that midlife is often marked by stability and satisfaction, not crisis. Faimberg (2013) critiques the term “midlife crisis” entirely as lacking in clinical value, instead framing midlife suffering as part of an ordinary process of meaning making and life integration rather than deviation from the norm. This idea speaks of my earlier theory that learning does not stop at childhood, and continues throughout adult life.

Together, Brennan et al. (2023), Faimberg (2013), and Schmidt (2020) reveal that what is commonly called a “midlife crisis” is often a convergence of unresolved developmental experiences, sociocultural narratives, and systemic pressures rather than a biologically inevitable breakdown tied to age. Brennan et al. reframe midlife despair as the continuation of earlier emotional wounds, while Faimberg emphasizes the existential and relational depth of midlife as part of “ordinary human suffering” rather than crisis. Schmidt’s feminist critique further dismantles the term’s authority, exposing its historical manipulation and gendered misuse. These authors collectively support a liberatory and compassionate framework that replaces the deterministic myth of midlife crisis with a trauma informed, developmental view of midlife as a threshold for meaning, integration, and growth.

It would be remiss to explore recursive healing in midlife without addressing how power, control, and early relational environments shape the nervous system's long-term capacity for regulation and resilience. Research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2004) emphasizes that chronic exposure to stress especially when accompanied by unpredictability or lack of relational safety can disrupt the brain’s architecture, leading to heightened emotional reactivity and impaired executive function well into adulthood. Power imbalances, whether in families, institutions, or society at large, are embodied experiences that mold the stress response system. The Duluth Model’s “Power and Control Wheel” (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2024) vividly illustrates how coercive environments erode autonomy and trust, conditioning individuals to adapt to survival-based behavior patterns. These adaptations, while functional in unsafe environments, often resurface later in life, especially in midlife when individuals confront repressed and buried emotional wounds. Outreach (2021) underscores how children internalize social hierarchies and power structures, often normalizing subjugation or dissociation in ways that become embedded in the nervous system. Palusci (2013) and Connolly (2011) further reveal how adverse childhood experiences and intergenerational trauma manifest somatically and relationally over time, resurfacing in midlife as opportunities for integration. When viewed through this lens, the so-called midlife crisis may not be a “crisis” at all, but a recursive, embodied reckoning with an unprocessed powerlessness that is seeking resolution

through relational safety, autonomy, and meaning-making (Snow, 2025; 2025).

Xia et al. (2025) and Taylor-Robinson et al. (2018) showed that the U-shaped curve of happiness is not universal. Socioeconomic status, cultural context, and early life adversity are far more predictive of midlife outcomes than age alone. Felitti et al. (1998) demonstrated through the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study that early relational trauma increases the risk of adult health problems, including emotional distress during midlife. Behaviors are not fixed traits, but instead should be seen as recursive trauma responses. Midlife becomes significant because it is often the first-time adults experience relational conditions that are safe enough to trigger integration. (Brennan et al., 2023; Faimberg, 2013; Lachman, 2004) Rather than a time of breakdown, midlife can be a breakthrough to healing long standing emotional wounds.

Drawing on relational neuroscience, Daniel Siegel (1999) affirms that the brain's development continues across the lifespan and that relationships play a critical role in shaping neural integration. This supports the idea that healing occurs not in isolation but in connection through coregulation, curiosity, and attunement. With this perspective, midlife emotional unrest is then better understood as the nervous system's recursive attempt to heal. In a society less invested in linear, deficit-based models of development, this phase could be recognized as a natural part of a continuous, non-linear human journey.

In conclusion, the myth of the midlife crisis, while culturally compelling, does not hold up to empirical or theoretical scrutiny. Instead, midlife distress often reflects unresolved childhood trauma or attachment disruptions, cultural and gender-based stressors, and the nervous system's adaptive capacity for recursive repair. Recognizing midlife as a potential turning point for integration and relational repair rather than decline invites a more compassionate, trauma informed, and hopeful understanding of human development. This information should be of particular interest to autistics who are statistically more likely to be subject to a disproportionate amount of relational and complex trauma in their childhoods.

Western Parenting Impacts on Human Development and Behavior: America's Hidden Health Crisis

In a recent podcast, Gabor Maté said “We use this word discipline, but what does the word discipline actually mean? We think it means punishment. No, it doesn’t. Who had disciples? Jesus, for example, had disciples. Not because he punished or threatened them, but because he loved them and they loved him. So then naturally they wanted to learn more from him.” (Lansbury and Maté, 2024)

Abstract:

Using punitive discipline methods results in lower levels of cognitive complexity, which is how well people perceive things. Low cognitive complexity results in difficulties with self-control and emotional self-regulation, which show up in adulthood as deviant behavior, such as impulsivity and aggression. Deviance is any behavior or reaction that lies outside of social norms. This research project focuses on socio-emotional deviant behaviors which fail to conform to society’s norms and expectations, such as aggression and low impulse control. This research compiled qualitative data from five interview subjects who represent a range of ages, genders, and races, and analyzed the information, concluding that experiencing supportive correction in the form of connection, empathy and understanding alongside clear and direct communication during childhood mitigated potential difficulties with emotional regulation in adulthood.

This research project connects attachment theory with situational control theory, providing a valuable link between the fields of psychology and sociology, and its findings offer a potential solution to mitigating and preventing deviant behaviors resulting from difficulties with emotional regulation, which can be seen in society today. The literature review contains the topics of parent imprinting and role modeling, attachment and communication theories (or a lack of imprinting and positive

role models), the part that emotion plays in development and how it is stifled by insecure attachment, ways that fear can impact learning and development, Adverse Childhood Experiences, social and moral integration, and the prefrontal cortex of the brain.

Keywords: attachment, discipline, behavior, communication, parenting, prefrontal cortex, cognitive complexity

Thesis:

It is well documented that the ways parents and caregivers communicate with their children affect a child's abilities to empathize. Using punitive discipline methods can damage or arrest development to the prefrontal cortex. Childhood symptomatology appears as difficulties with self-control and emotional self-regulation, and in adulthood, impulsivity and aggression. Prefrontal cortex functionality through cognitive complexity can be measured by evaluating an individual's differences between their tested morality and emotional intelligence scores.

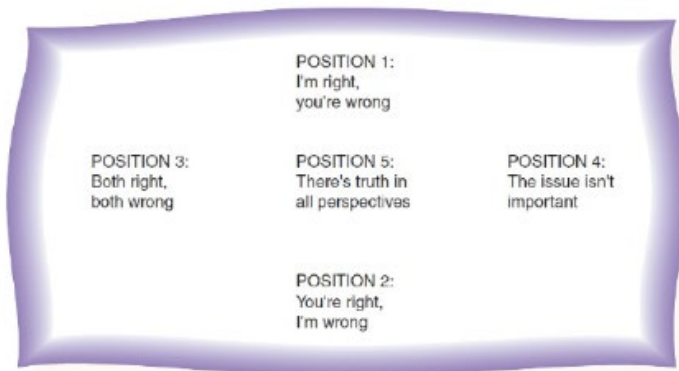
I chose the topic of generational trauma and the different types of communication associated with various attachment styles in order to study how different methods of childhood discipline could potentially correlate with adult behavior patterns. This study is based on research that I performed independently following my own trauma recovery after separation from a dysfunctional family system, and thus a personal bias was potentially introduced to the study in the initial topic choice. The research for this paper and study was gathered with this bias in mind and an effort was made to be objective and remain detached from the outcome and the process. That was done by attempting to not influence my subjects' answers in any way, even when prompting them to provide further clarifying information. It is believed that the data gathered from all five subjects of various ages and genders is an accurate representation of what the findings would be among similar individuals outside of this research project. Further in-depth research on this topic would certainly be recommended, and would be supported by the results of this study.

Literature Review:

Modeling emotional regulation, boundaries and conflict resolution creates children who are heard and listened to, and who will feel confident to advocate for their needs while trusting those needs will be met or at least taken into consideration and negotiated fairly. Vulnerable children who are not given this security in their attachments with their primary caregivers suffer tragic consequences from their parent's lack of ability to lead with empathy and integrity. "There is more and more evidence that dissociation is caused by dysfunctional attachment - you don't have somebody who looks at you and picks you up and responds to you when you are in distress, so you learn to deal with your misery by shutting yourself down," said Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. (Van Der Kolk, 2015). Dr. Gordon Neufeld of the Neufeld Institute said that "Emotion, long dismissed as a nuisance factor, is now confirmed to be at the core of development and wellbeing. Yet little is being taught about the nature of emotion or the implications for parenting, teaching, and treatment. To make sense of emotion is to make sense of us all. There is no better way to glean insight into oneself and others than through a working knowledge of the science of emotion." (Maté and Neufeld, 2019)

Methods of parenting typically vary from generation to generation, especially when it comes to discipline. While this is normal, it does not necessarily mean that these patterns are beneficial to repeat. This research paper will clarify which parenting styles are least and most beneficial for a child's development into a fully individuated adult, with appropriately developed morals and the ability to act on them. Mimicking or mirroring others is the first step in the development of a separate sense of self (Mead, 1934) and when children are cared for by adults lacking in cognitive complexity, they are unable to fully individuate. Cognitive complexity is the ability to construct a variety of different frameworks for viewing any issue (Adler and Proctor, 2017). Parents' approach to discipline, their family communication styles (Model A) and individual attachment styles (Model B) all impact their child's development of both empathy and cognitive complexity. In other words, parents can apply their own egocentric influences on their child's ability to perspective shift (Burleson, et al., 1995). Parents' communication styles also have a powerful effect on a child's development in general. A study by John Gottman has shown that there are two separate styles of parenting:

“emotion coaching” and “emotion dismissing” (Gottman et al., 2013), with the coaching approach giving children the skills they need for communicating their feelings in adulthood. Children who grew up in dismissing families have an elevated risk of developing behavior problems as they mature (Lunkenheimer et al., 2007). Studies show a connection between cognitive complexity and empathy (Joireman, 2004). Research also shows that people who live in individualist cultures lack cognitive complexity, as opposed to collectivist cultures who are more skilled at perspective taking, because those cultures require greater attunement to each other. Evidence suggests that this deficit in cognitive complexity manifests itself as an egocentric interference to the thought process. In other words, individualistic Western cultures create in its members an inability to empathize due to this culturally ingrained egocentrism (Triandis et al., 1988; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Ross et al., 2002) with one study concluding “lifelong membership in a particular culture may shape one’s tendency or ability to take another’s perspective into account while comprehending language” (Wu et al., 2013). It is important to note that this egocentric interference is unique to Western, meaning European and North American, culture (Wu and Keysar, 2007). There is still good news for Westerners: cognitive complexity is a skill which can be developed and enhanced through practicing viewing issues from multiple sides. A group of Japanese children developed the Pillow Method, called such because it views every conflict or communication issue as having four sides and a center just like a pillow. These consist of: “I’m right and you’re wrong (side 1)”; “you’re right and I’m wrong (side 2)”; “we are both right and both are wrong (side 3)”; “the issue isn’t important to us (side 4)”; “there is truth in all perspectives (center)”.



This exercise takes effort and time to pause and consider a problem before responding as opposed to simply reacting, but after repeated use will train the brain to be able to quickly switch perspectives. The pillow method enables people to see the flaws in their own thinking as well as see the merits of other perspectives. Cognitive complexity relates to higher levels of emotional intelligence, and is a measure of how well an individual can intuitively understand information. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to perceive, express, and regulate emotions. Research has shown that trauma can disrupt a child's ability to regulate their emotions, lowering their emotional intelligence. (Lang, 2022, page 243)

Attachment Theory, created by John Bowlby in 1982, focuses on connection being our earliest need in infancy as a survival mechanism (Model B). This goes on to form the basis of all adult relationships (Simon and Baxter, 1993). Insecure partners are more likely to act in ways that increase their odds that their insecurities will become manifest in a self-fulfilling repetitive cycle (Fowler and Dillow, 2011). Healthy families emphasize interdependence, where everyone involved is able to maintain their sense of self while still depending on each other, and respect the autonomy of all individuals present, regardless of age or maturity level. They rely on trust and two-way reciprocity, absent in traditional parenting and punitive discipline methods. They also rest on a firm foundation of cooperation and seek to correct behaviors through open dialogue, because "a sense of connection is what leads to compliance" (Adler and Proctor, 2017). This is sometimes referred to as "positive parenting" "attachment parenting" "gentle parenting" or "modern parenting" interchangeably, but what these terms all have in common is that these methods foster individual self-reliance in children by respecting their individuality. This paper will be referring to non-traditional parenting as "supportive parenting", due to how these methods focus on creating a loving atmosphere that prioritizes maintaining the emotional connection and bond between caregiver and child. "Open communication and shared decision making produces better results than power plays and refusal to have an open dialogue" (Adler and Proctor, 2017). Supportive parenting creates secure attachment, which results in grown adults who are able to communicate clearly, share healthy intimacy, and maintain effective relationships with others (Shochet et al., 2007). When both partners in romantic relationships have a secure attachment style, they

are able to move through conflict by communicating constructively (Domingue and Mollen, 2009). Children who grow up with disruptions to their attachment bonds tend to be more anxious and have fewer social skills in adulthood (Thompson and Trice-Black, 2012) and are more likely to act aggressively themselves (Wahl et al., 2012).

William Makepeace Thackeray said that “Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of all children.” Traditional Western parenting practices are based on systems of imposed hierarchy, which view parents as the ultimate authorities in the home who utilize coercive methods of punishments and consequences. Limits are set by authority figures and enforced through power and coercion in order to control the child in lieu of parents modeling and teaching self-control. Imposed hierarchy leads to insecure attachment, Reactive Attachment Disorder or RAD, and ACEs. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is a term coined in 1995 from the CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and household challenges, and their long-term impacts on adult health and well-being (Centers for Disease Control, 2023). ACEs leave a lasting mark on a child’s forming brain and nervous system and they will result in insecure attachment and reactive attachment disorders (RAD), which are characterized by a fear-based bond with caregivers created through punitive discipline and inconsistent or intermittent supportive reinforcement. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 2023), RAD forms as a result of negative experiences with adults in a child’s early years. In the vast majority of cases, RAD exists alongside all neurological disorders. These include mood and personality disorders, and deviant behaviors such as demand avoidance and refusal to obey rules which are commonly associated with oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. Demand avoidance and a refusal to comply and obey authority figures arises due to an early disruption in the bond between a child and their caregiver. A lack of emotional safety creates a psychological crisis, which results in an inability to trust caregivers to meet their needs, and disconnects the child from their attachment figure (s). The recent study Parent Grandiose Narcissism and Child Socio-Emotional Well Being: The Role of Parenting states in its abstract that “Negative parenting tactics intervened in relations between facets

of...[a] child internalizing and externalizing [their emotions]” (Rawn, et. al, 2023).

The most widely used parent training programs available today and ones most utilized by social service workers include Positive Parenting (Triple P), Love and Logic, and the Incredible Years programs. They all rely on a parenting philosophy of imposed hierarchy, which is rooted in socially accepted and condoned coercive control methods. Behavioral parent training (BPT) techniques generally consist of training parents in the use of reward and punishment following appropriate and inappropriate behaviors (Behavioral Parenting Training). However, coercive rewards are still punishments, and promote extrinsic motivation over intrinsic motivation. “Behaviorism in education, or behavioral learning theory is a branch of psychology that focuses on how people learn through their interactions with the environment. It is based on the idea that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning, which is a process of reinforcement and punishment. According to this theory, learning is a change in observable behavior that results from experience.” (National University, 2023) Behaviorism undermines both relational and mental health. If the option to control is removed, what is left is figuring out how to work with children collaboratively through non-coercion, connection, collaboration, safety, trust, consent, autonomy, kindness and compassion. Relationships are the most powerful tool for change.

Yuval Noah Harari (2015) said in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* that “Most mammals emerge from the womb like glazed earthenware emerging from a kiln - any attempt at remolding will only scratch or break them. Humans emerge from the womb like molten glass from a furnace. They can be spun, stretched, and shaped with a surprising degree of freedom. This is why today we can educate our children to become Christian or Buddhist, capitalist or socialist, warlike or peace-loving.” Jane Addams (1961), founder of the Hull House and the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, believed that society can be changed through effort. This research project shows that it could potentially change the way that it works by changing the ways we parent our children. Instances of deviance and demand avoidance which lead to incarcerations can be dramatically reduced by educating parents about reasonable age-appropriate limits and teaching them how to create and enforce consistent consequences through the use of positive

reinforcement. In a study on Early Growth and Development following 360 adopted children whose biological parents exhibited psychopathy, significantly fewer behavioral problems were experienced when their adoptive parents used more structured [supportive] parenting, as opposed to unstructured. (Leve, et. al., 2010) Focusing on connection over correction markedly reduces the intensity and frequency of hostile and defiant behaviors, and shifts the relationship dynamic from “them vs me” to a more cognitively complex “us and we,” which creates trust and a sense of emotional and psychological safety. This shift to more positive parenting practices could potentially result in a more moral society, children with a functional internal guidance system, reformation of our justice system, and ultimately a conscious shift away from imposed hierarchical authoritarian systems of government which control their populations through methods of fear and coercion. Aasi Tahir Siddique said that “If we are serious about bringing effective behavioral changes to adopt a peaceful life then it must begin long before an unborn becomes a victim of the cycle of socialization.” (Siddique, 2023)

Fredrich Nietzsche said that “insanity in individuals is something rare - but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule.” Because Western culture has accepted traditional parenting as its established norm, it is unable to see how insane of a practice traditional parenting actually is, and by not challenging the status quo, a cycle of insanity is continually being perpetuated. In individualistic cultures, traditional parenting methods lack cognitive complexity due to Western egocentrism, which results in “I’m right and you’re wrong” hierarchies of authority. “Subject D” stated during their interview for this paper which can be found located in the field test results section regarding her experiences with conflict as a child that, “Children weren’t really considered people, so their needs and their wants and their personhood weren’t really considered equally...you can’t even really negotiate a conflict unless you acknowledge that the parties are equal.” Western egocentrism evolved into culturally accepted norms of punishment and reward systems, where children are taught to manage their behavior through expecting their adherence to strict rules with punitive consequences should they not do so. Traditional parenting methods expect children to obey and defer to their parents as a higher authority, and creates dialectical tensions between a child’s need for autonomy and their need for connection. When these needs for autonomy

and connection are not met in childhood, these dialectical tensions become traumas, and attachment disorders occur. Traditional parenting tactics apply conditions to a parent's love and approval, and when those conditions are not met, these parenting practices dictate punitive punishment, which include spanking, time-outs, having earned privileges revoked, or being yelled at, with the implicit goal of scaring a child into "being good." These may change a child's actions on the outside but will not change the internal issues that prompted the acting-out behavior. This traditional model for parenting has been our established norm for parenting our children for the past 200 years, ever since the Industrial Revolution, and it can breed anger, mistrust, rebellion and problems with authority well into adulthood. "If a child stops crying after someone ignores them, shames them, yells at them, or spansks them, they do not calm down; they shut down. For a developing brain, calming down is a relational process. It involves receiving empathy, understanding, and care," said Eli Harwood, author of *Securely Attached: Transform Your Attachment Patterns into Loving, Lasting Romantic Relationships (A Guided Journal)* (Harwood, 2023). Traditional parenting is now rapidly being replaced by "love-based parenting" "attachment parenting" or "positive parenting" which for the purposes of this paper will be defined as "supportive parenting" that relies on mindful tactics such as connection, presence, helping children name what they are feeling, and developing corrective but supportive solutions. It's okay to set rules, for example, but it's important to ensure they know these rules ahead of time while being consistent and reasonable in how those rules are enforced. Effective disciplinary strategies set clear and appropriate expectations, and then caregivers work together with children to understand what is getting in their way if they find it difficult to meet those expectations. "Toddlers have only two action items on their agenda: play, and deep emotional connection with their parents. If you're struggling with their behavior, their life is likely lacking in one of those two ways," stated Robin Enzig, Founder of Visible Child (Enzig, 2022).

According to the Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children, corporal punishment is defined as "any punishment in which force is issued and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light." Examples include shaking, kicking, forcing ingestion (soap, hot sauce), "smacking", "slapping", or "spanking", and also

include nonphysical forms of punishment such as verbal and emotional abuse, or activities intended to cause shame to a person, such as humiliation, threats, ridicule, etc. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018) “Vast amounts of research have consistently demonstrated strong correlations between youth who experienced harsh punishment from their parents and increased risks of changes in brain physiology that show on MRI studies, mental health disorders, misconduct, aggressive behaviors, and adverse outcomes that extend into adulthood.” (Lang, page 156). This can include shrinking of the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex in particular. The prefrontal cortex is one of the last areas to mature in the brain, and is thought of as the place where the personality resides. It is where an individual takes in input from their external world, processes it, and uses that information to instantly react to their experiences without conscious thought. A study published in Neuroscience in 2018 identified two specific areas (DLPFC and OFC) in the prefrontal cortex of the brain that are responsible for the executive functions related to inhibitory control, planning and problem solving, delay discounting, and risky decision making (areas that may affect how an individual’s morality is perceived by others, or how the judge themselves). This study showed how both DLPFC and OFC work interdependently to contribute to both cognitive control and emotional-motivational aspects as an integrated hot and cold network (Vahid, et. al., 2018, page 119) (Figures A and B).

Punitive discipline leverages shame as a teaching tool, which results in a child experiencing disruptions to their attachment bonds with their caregivers, damaging the brain’s development during a crucial period in an individual’s life, and that faulty wiring in the brain results in insecure dysfunctional relationships as an adult. “The right orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) is about maternal bonding. It functions as a primary regulator of the amygdala. Early maternal connection causes the OFC to grow in size in the first few months of life, overlapping the frontal tip of the left prefrontal cortex. The cortex has plasticity, so even through adversity and trauma, as a child grows, connection and attunement help to mitigate the activation of the amygdala. A poorly developed OFC is correlated with attachment disorders among other challenges creating negative plasticity - the physical malleability of the brain in stress,” said Robert Scaer, M.D. (Scaer, 2014). The right OFC is responsible for childhood bonding to caregivers, and it is also responsible for controlling and correcting

reward and punishment related reinforcers, showing a clear connection between attachment and discipline in the structures of the brain itself. Even time outs, which were at one time considered to be a more humane alternative to spanking, are now known to cause significant emotional distress in children. “We are all social animals and have a deep need for connection. Human beings are wired for social interaction, and isolation can have a detrimental effect on our health and well-being” (Sapolsky, 2018). Professor and author Brené Brown says that shame is the fear of disconnection, and safety is a sense of validation and belonging (Brown, 2007). When a parent leverages their child’s connection to them in order to force compliance, it creates a core abandonment wound, which results in problems trusting their caregivers, and this mistrust then manifests as maladaptive and dysfunctional means for achieving connections as an adult who will have difficulties individuating into a fully mature grownup (Madigan et. al., 2016) (Beaudoin and Bernier, 2013) (Tarrin-Sweeny, 2013) (Kerig and Beker, 2010) (Meuller et. al., 2013). The right OFC is also responsible for coordinating the retrieval of explicit memories for use in speech and thus a poorly developed OFC will result in communication difficulties. It is hypothesized that the right OFC plays a significant role in our decision-making process as well, which indicates that poor attachment in childhood will lead to poor choices as an adult (Gore et. al., 2023). The methodology for this research paper describes a measurement that the researcher referred to as an MES index, which may potentially indicate a poorly developed OFC. Lower MES index scores (less difference between measured levels of morality and EQ) initially appear to correlate with lower levels of cognitive complexity (refer to proof of thesis below). A higher MES score may indicate greater cognitive complexity and a more matured OFC.

French sociologist Émile Durkeim (1858-1917) concluded that the moral constitution of a society is what determines its suicide rate. (Nehring, 2014, p.96-115) Durkeim believed that suicide rates were based on the imbalance of two social forces: social and moral integration. In a recent cohort study using twins, childhood adversity was linked to increased odds of psychiatric disorders (Dánielsdóttir, et. al., 2024). At the time of Durkeim’s writings, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) had yet to be discovered. When the morals in a society decline, the instances of ACEs increase, which in turn cause higher suicide rates.

Morals can be defined as the standards that guide a person's behavior and choices. They inform an individuals' beliefs about what is or is not acceptable. Virtually everyone is familiar with the Golden Rule and the adage of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," which implores society to act considerately. However, this doesn't work well if others would like to be treated differently than what you may prefer. Milton Bennett proposed that to overcome issues of differing wants, a Platinum Rule of "do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them" helps individuals to understand how others think and what they want before acting. It implies that empathy is a prerequisite for moral sensitivity. (Adler and Proctor, 2017) Many other studies have been done that connect empathy to moral development (Narvaez, 2010) (Aquino and Reed, 2002) (Aquino et al., 2009) (Pathak et al., 2012) (Mestvirishvili et al., 2020), while other studies have looked at the impacts of shame on mental health (Yakeley, 2018) (El-Jamil, 2003) and on the impacts of shame and humiliation on moral decision making (Nelissen, 2013) (Silfver-Kuhlampi et al., 2015). Robert Sapolsky, who has researched extensively in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and evolutionary biology for decades, said that "empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Empathy is essential for building strong relationships and creating a just and compassionate society" (Sapolsky, 2018). This research project connects an individual's abilities to act on their morals with their abilities to regulate and control themselves and evaluates how the area of the brain responsible for cognitive complexity or the ability to perspective shift is related to areas of the brain damaged by punitive discipline. The field experiment results show that the development of adequate self-control and emotional self-regulation by which a person acquires the means to act on their morals is determined by the methods of discipline that were experienced in childhood.

The primary research paper used for the literature review portion of this paper was "Attachment as a Mediator between Childhood Maltreatment and Adult Symptomatology," written by Robert T. Mueller, Kristin Thornback, and Ritu Bedi, published by the Journal of Family Violence (2012). This study looked at how attachment between caregiver and child could potentially mitigate the effects that childhood mistreatment and abuse have on the later development of adult mental disorders. By

connecting their own work with multiple other studies already done on the topic, including one published by Trickett and McBride-Chang (1995), it links insecure attachments with caregivers in childhood to “increased levels of delinquency and criminality, difficulty controlling aggression, social withdrawal and difficulty in relationships,” and with being “more likely to interpret the actions of others as hostile.” The paper by Mueller, Thornback and Bedi cites multiple other sources who show that almost all of what is thought of as “mental illness” is actually trauma from childhood; the memories of which can be forgotten by adulthood but still shape subconscious behaviors. It relates psychological symptoms including what might be considered deviance in adulthood with the experience of insecure attachment as a child. They also emphasize the importance of viewing this as a systemic issue, not just an individual one. Their findings support the thesis proposed in this field study which looks at the effects of punitive discipline on human behavior. They created vital academic dialogue around the subject and the previous studies they cite indicate that secure attachment is crucial for an individual’s healthy psychological development. During their analysis of John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory, the authors of this study stated that insecurities in attachment “represent an individual’s level of fear of abandonment in relationships,” (Mueller, et. al., 2012, page 244). This ties directly into this paper’s field research and subsequent analysis on the impact of abandonment wounds on the childhood development of the right orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), which is responsible for maternal bonding. The right OFC is also responsible for controlling and correcting reward related and punishment related reinforcers. In other words, it assists in establishing the Western cultural norms surrounding discipline practices. (Figure A) Therefore, a key focus point of this field research is connecting caregiver bonding in childhood and adult deviant behaviors with how society approaches discipline methods.

The Mueller, Thornback and Bedi study looked at the role of caregiver attachment in mediating childhood abuse, and how that affects the development of adulthood mental illness and psychological symptomatology. It specifically looked at how disruptions to attachment result in an individual externalizing and internalizing their emotions. The participants in Mueller’s study were undergraduate students whose data was gathered through use of a questionnaire. The researchers rated their

participants' attachment styles, emotional and behavioral problems, trauma histories, and experiences of abuse using a sequence of four separate questionnaires previously developed by other researchers. The researchers analyzed this data in order to correlate and determine the relationships between abuse, attachment, and psychological symptoms. Variables in attachment accounted for 85% of the variances in both attachment anxiety and avoidance. They used structural equation modeling to conclude that there is a direct link between childhood attachment and adult symptomatology (Meuller, et. al., 2012, page 248). Their study found that adult attachment in close relationships partially mediated the effects of psychological maltreatment on externalizing and internalizing [emotions], and trauma related symptomatology. (Meuller, et. al., 2012, page 249). This is a key point, and these study results indicate that experiencing safe and secure attachments in adulthood can help to mitigate the development of and lessen the impacts of mental illness among those impacted by insecure attachment, which parallels the results of my field research.

They state that "In a meta-analysis including 105 studies using the Adult Attachment Interview, van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2008) found that individuals with insecure attachment styles were over represented in clinical groups with both internalizing and externalizing disorders." (Meuller, et. al., 2012, page 244) and also state that "a large-scale meta-analysis performed by BakermansKranenburg and van IJzendoorn (2009) revealed that approximately 56% of individuals in non-clinical adult samples were classified as securely attached." That means that slightly under half of all adults everywhere suffer from poorly developed and maladaptive coping strategies in their adult relationships. This data implies that insecure attachments are a massive hidden health crisis, one that this research project hopes to continue to shed more light on. The Mueller et. al. paper stated that "the negative effects of childhood maltreatment on the attachment system is important because of the impact it has on children's functioning." They go on to explain these impacts, which constitute the basis for this field research project. Their paper showed that insecurities created in childhood manifest as problems in later adult relationships, which all of the five subjects in this research paper have illustrated through their qualitative interviews collected here, confirming that punitive discipline methods result in adulthood

difficulties with self-control and emotional self-regulation, which results in impulsive and aggressive behaviors.

This research takes an interpretivist approach by collecting qualitative data through five in depth interviews in order to analyze information regarding how individuals experienced conflict in their childhood. It then contrasted that with their experiences in adulthood and compared their childhood experiences with any current deviant behaviors, then analyzed the results through a lens of both DAT and Situational Control Theory (SAT) (Fiedler, 1978). SAT suggests that people may not behave morally when experiencing stress due to a temporary inability to exercise self-control. SAT “proposes that the causes of human actions are situational. The theory further proposes that humans are fundamentally rule-guided actors and that their responses to motivators are essentially an outcome of the interaction between their moral propensities and the moral norms of the settings in which they take part.” (Wikström, 2014) SAT argues that when outside pressure is exerted on an individual, they may not act in accordance with their personal morals or values, because they fail to exercise self-control. “Viewed in concert, it is fair to say that morality and self-control interlock and form what we call moral self-control whenever people need to suppress a selfish impulse or desire in the service of a less selfish (e.g., cooperative, prosocial) moral value or goal.” (Hofmann, Meindl, Mooijman, Graham, 2018) The results of this study show that adulthood difficulties in emotional regulation and self-control can be correlated with experiencing a lack of supportive correction in childhood.

Methodology:

I chose to study the topic of generational trauma and the different types of communication associated with various attachment styles because I wanted to study how various methods of childhood discipline could potentially correlate with adult behavior patterns. This study is based on the research that I performed independently during my own trauma recovery following separation from a dysfunctional family system, and thus a personal bias was potentially introduced to the study in the initial topic choice. The research for this paper and study was gathered with this bias in mind and an effort was made to be objective and remain detached from the outcome and the process, and this was done by

attempting to not influence my subjects' answers in any way, even when prompting them to provide further clarifying information. It is believed that the data gathered from all five subjects of various ages and genders is an accurate representation of what the findings would be among similar individuals outside of this research project. I did confirm these numbers through the use of a separate informal observation of my Interpersonal Communications class, included in a footnote here.

Family Communications Theory (Model A) was developed by Ascan F. Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick (2002). It views the family as a social system, and divides these family systems into categories of communication through four distinct patterns. The four family communication patterns are consensual (high conversation, high conformity), protective (low conversation, high conformity), pluralistic (high conversation, low conformity), and laissez-faire (low conversation, low conformity). Families with high levels of conformity produce children who have a fewer number of interpersonal skills in their adult relationships (Koesten, 2004), are conflict avoidant, and tend to be more hierarchical, with a clear sense that some members have more authority than others (Alder and Proctor, 2017). Families with low conversation orientations interact less and are more emotionally distant. Conflict tends to be avoided in these families, and they are characterized by power plays and refusal to have an open dialogue. In protective families (low conversation, high conformity), obedience to authority is emphasized. Protective family members typically scored low on communication skills (Samek and Reuter, 2012). Pluralistic families produce offspring that are less verbally aggressive than any other type (Schrodt and Carr, 2012). In pluralistic families, all family members' contributions are valued and evaluated on their own merits. Studies have shown that in addition to the association between communication and family closeness (Schrodt, 2006; Vazsonyi, Hibbert & Snider, 2003) FCT communication patterns are also associated with the amount and quality of intimacy shared in close adult relationships following childhood (Ledbetter, 2009). Pluralistic families tend to be more securely attached, and utilize supportive discipline methods. The other three types of patterns tend to result in more insecurely attached family members. Based on the results of the field experiment here, as well as in previous studies that show a direct link between low

conformity and low aggression (Schrodt and Carr, 2012), pluralistic patterns are the optimal and ideal FCT category.

I used FCT categories while analyzing the data gathered from my five research subjects to categorize the FCT types experienced in childhood based on the interview results. Of the five subjects consenting to give interviews for this research project, Subjects A, C and D describe their families of origin as being Protective (low conversation, high conformity), Subject B describes his family as being Pluralistic (high conversation, low conformity), and Subject E described her family as being Consensual (high conversation, high conformity). Given a reasonable margin of error, these numbers appear to correlate to the numbers acquired with my observational class poll referenced in the footnote below.

This study analyzes the qualitative data obtained through interviews by using Differential Association Theory (DAT), which was initially proposed by Edwin Sutherland in 1939

In addition to the interviews provided for this project, on Friday, November 24, 2023 I also conducted a separate informal observational poll of the classmates in my Interpersonal Communications class regarding their respective FCTs, and those results did correlate with the numbers and data found by my interviews. During an online discussion forum on family communication patterns, I noted from the answers provided that three students felt their families used a Consensual style, one student felt their parent was Laissez-faire, six students felt that their families were Pluralistic, and eleven students identified themselves as coming from Protective families, which is exactly half of the number of the twenty-two total enrolled students in the class. 50% indicates a hidden health crisis, given the negative impact this family communication pattern has on socio-emotional development. Because a college classroom is not considered an open space and there is an expectation of privacy in a standard classroom setting, and because I did not explicitly acquire consent from my classmates to use their information in this project, their names have not been used here, and the information gleaned from my observations is purely anecdotal. I recommend developing further in-depth research into this area to investigate any potential FCT correlations to other identifying human characteristics such as race or socio-economic status, through more ethical means.

(Sutherland, 1995) and revised in 1947. DAT proposes that people learn deviant behavior through their interactions with others. This paper assumes that behavior is learned from others such as family members, friendship groups, online communities, schools and other institutions etc. through the processes of behavioral modeling and positive or negative reinforcement as well as through communication, and that most of this learning happens within our intimate personal groups and relationships, specifically through Family Communications Pattern Theory (FCRT) (Compton and Craig, 2019) (Hesse, et. al., 2017). This paper also looks at the data through a lens of Control Theory, which proposes that weak bonds between individuals, such as seen with attachment disorders, are responsible for creating opportunities for individuals to deviate from the expected norms for their behavior.

Two ethical issues in qualitative research include confidentiality and the role of the researcher as a data collection instrument. The identities of the research subjects in this study have been disguised to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. The subject matter is sensitive and was potentially emotionally upsetting to participants, but every effort was made during the interviews to avoid harming the research subjects. They were made aware of the topic and nature of the research prior to obtaining their consent to participate in the study.

During the data collection process, the interviews were recorded and these recordings were directly transcribed before any analysis took place. A series of six questions were developed for qualitative interviews, which included two questions intended to inquire into the subject's experiences with discipline and conflict in their childhoods. Two questions were asked about their current conflict resolution skills and self-regulation abilities, and two questions which required them to define morality and ethics by giving personal examples. Test subjects A, B, and C were asked these six questions initially, then they were followed up with regarding a final seventh question that was developed a month later, which asked them specifically about impulsive and aggressive behaviors. This final question was based on the study "Parent Grandiose Narcissism and Child Socio-Emotional Well Being: The Role of Parenting," first published online October 19, 2023 (Rawn, Keller, Widiger, 2023). Since Rawn et. al.'s study was directly related to the topic of this study, the added question was shown to be a necessary step, and the timing of the

last question was not deemed problematic to the results of this study due to not influencing the results in any way. “In terms of takeaways from the paper – for parents, it would be the knowledge of what parenting practices to use,” Rawn told PsyPost (Dolan, 2023). “Specifically, those that are more positive (e.g., emotional warmth, autonomy support, and use of democratic discipline) rather than those that are more negative (e.g., punitive or permissive discipline).” Subjects D and E were contacted after this revision was made, and were asked all seven questions at the same time. Following their completion and transcription, the interviews were analyzed for communication, relational and behavior patterns repeating over time.

A conscious attempt was made to get a wide range of ages and genders for demographic sampling. Subjects A and B are both people that I met online and have a casual acquaintance with. Subject C is my caregiver. Subject D is a friend of mine, and Subject E is a classmate. None of the participants received any financial compensation or incentives in order to participate in this study. It is important to note that they may have been more willing to share deeply personal details because of an existing relationship with me prior to this study. In order to minimize harm done to my subjects due to the sensitive topics discussed in our interviews, I attempted to remain both nonjudgmental and empathetic while gathering my data. Because this research relies solely on oral reports, the participants' own personal bias may have been unintentionally introduced, and therefore it is recommended to perform further in-depth longitudinal research in this area in order to more fully understand the dynamics of socio-emotional development and the impact that both parenting styles and the communication styles experienced in child have on adult mental health. Before the interview, the participants were asked to complete two online quizzes that measured their levels of emotional intelligence and morality. Given the relatively small sample size, a larger study could be justified through the results that were obtained here.

FIELD EXPERIMENT:

Subject A

Age: 45 years old

Gender: Questioning

Location: Washington state

Diagnosis: Bipolar (BPD) and PTSD

Overall EQ result: 66.19% (high)

Morality quiz results: 72% Nurture

MES score: 5.81

Subject A was informed of this study and asked to participate via text message. They are an online acquaintance of mine, and have no direct relation to me. After consent to participate was obtained, they were sent two links to two online surveys via text and asked to screenshot and send me back their results.

After the results were obtained from both quizzes, a time was arranged to have an interview over zoom video call, where Subject A was asked six questions about their experiences in childhood and their current life experiences in adulthood. Subject A interviewed on Saturday, October 28, 2023 at 6:00 pm Pacific Standard Time. I sent them a link with my zoom meeting information. They were told that their name would be kept confidential to protect their anonymity and that their personal details may be used for data collection and analysis purposes. They were informed of the purposes of the study and asked to provide their verbal consent over video, which they did. They agreed to sign a consent form, which they did. I identified my study as being performed under the guidelines of the American Sociological Association's code of ethics and a copy of this was offered to them. They were provided with a copy of the original research plan and indicated they understood the purpose of the study and their role in it. The following interview took about 20 minutes to complete, and was recorded for later transcribing.

The interview questions each subject is asked in this study are as follows:

When you were a child...

1. What methods of discipline were used?
2. How was conflict handled in your home?

As an adult...

1. What do you do when you disagree with a friend or loved one?
2. How do you cope with difficult feelings?
3. How do you personally define morality?
4. Recall one instance when you were faced with making a difficult choice in life. How did you decide what to do?

When you were a child, what methods of discipline were used?

“My parents used spanking roughly until my sister was born, I don’t actually remember being spanked but I know that I was. My dad is now and has been for most of my life a pretty dedicated pacifist, he was opposed to it but he had let my mom decide at first. But then he changed his mind about that when my sister came along. So, a little bit of spanking early on, after that, time outs and removal of privileges, you know, grounding and that kind of thing.”

How was conflict handled in your home?

“Pretty often, conflict was avoided. You know, it would just get kind of avoided and not really talked about. And then when it actually, like, came up, it would be kind of explosive, like, screaming at each other and that sort of thing, which didn’t happen often, but happened more often with my mom than with my dad. But with my dad it would get much more explosive, but that would only happen like once every few years.”

What do you do when you disagree with a friend or loved one now?

“I try to bring it to them, I’m not always perfect about it but I’ll try to bring it to them and let them know preferably before I get too worked up about it so that I can remain calm about it. And I have been working on and have been relatively successful at avoiding escalation so that if they’re resistant to resolving the conflict and it doesn’t seem like it’s

going anywhere, I'm able to back off and not push, but that's been more of a recent development, basically over the past year since going to jail."

How do you cope with difficult feelings?

"I will generally escape into video games, smoke weed and kinda space out, stare at my phone. Until I can get into a place where they are manageable enough that I feel like they're not going to control my actions. And then if there's anything I can do about the root cause of them, then I'll try to. Sometimes I can't, sometimes I just have to endure; in that case I'm just going to have to endure; in that case I'm just going to dissociate more."

How do you personally define morality?

"Morality is what you consider to be right and wrong. It's where you're going to point at something and go "No, that's not okay" (emphasis on not being theirs). Morality is what you're okay with."

Recall one instance when you were faced with making a difficult choice in life. How did you decide what to do?

"I think that the most recent and the most dramatic of those would be reconciling with [Subject A's wife, her name is redacted]. And I was faced with this choice of, am I willing to do what it takes to repair things with somebody who has wounded me really deeply. It's not going to be easy and I knew that it wasn't going to be. I knew that whatever it took and whatever I had been through, it was still worth it. I was able to just kinda get into my own feeling of that and I could see that, yeah, there was going to be work. There was going to be suffering and it was worth it."

On November 20, 2023 at 4:55 Pacific Standard Time, Subject A was contacted over zoom and asked one follow up question regarding impulsive and aggressive behavior. The interview lasted approximately 6 minutes. For added context, Subject A and their wife practice polyamory, and their response indicates that.

As an adult...

1. Have you ever struggled with impulsive or aggressive behavior, or had difficulties in self-control or emotional regulation? Can you give one example of that?

Their response was as follows:

“That is absolutely something that I’ve struggled with frequently. The clearest example would be relatively recently. Getting in a fight with [wife’s name omitted]. It started out with, there was a new guy that was she was talking to, we’d had some friction because I had been wanting to meet her other partners, her other potential partners, and she hadn’t really wanted me to meet them, and so then this one, she was like, okay, you can meet him, he can come to our place. And I was like; I’d like to meet him before he comes to our place. And there was conflict about that, we were arguing about it in the car. We get home and I’m not doing well, I’m just kind of like shut down, and not wanting to be around her. Let’s see, trying to remember. I’ve told this story a lot of times but it’s been a while so I don’t remember anything because it’s a kind of trauma fog. Let’s see, I shut down for a while, and we ended up going to bed, and then the next day, like, along the way there was a knife involved. I put the knife where I could get it because I was scared of her, I don’t remember exactly why that was, that I was scared of her, but I remember that. So, then I’m shut down for a while, it’s like a day that I’m shut down and just not doing well. Next day, I’m telling her to stay back and give me space. She won’t. We’ve got just one bed in the trailer so I’m like no, you need to sleep in the other space, over in the yurt, which is not maybe the best bed but I’ve slept there to give her space before. Like, you need to go there and give me space. So, I’m telling her that she needs to leave because I am crazy enough that I don’t feel like she’s safe. And then I push her out of the bed and she comes back with a knife, not the same knife mind you, a knife from the kitchen that she has stashed under the bed. She comes for me with it, we wrestled for a bit, I get her held down until she puts that down, and finally leaves and goes and sleep in the other space. Next day, my dad comes to visit, and that goes reasonably well. During the altercation, she’s messed up my glasses a bit, they’re not completely broken, I can still kind of slightly wear them, but they’re not working very well. I tell her that I found a place to get them fixed and she’s like well, I’m not paying for that, we can’t afford that, so it’s not happening. Um, I go for her and try to go for her glasses, that turns

into another fight, and that ends up with the police being called and me going to jail. I'm kind of happy that I don't have all the details printed in my mind any longer (laughs)."

Subject B

Age: 26 years old

Gender: Male

Location: New Mexico state

Diagnosis: Autistic Spectrum disorder, moderate to severe

Overall EQ result: 58.81% (average)

Morality quiz results: 100% Nurture

MES score: 41.19

Subject B was informed of the study and asked to participate via text message. He was an online friend of mine, and has no direct relation to me. After consent to participate was obtained, he was sent two links to two online surveys via text and asked to screenshot and send back his results.

After the results were obtained from both quizzes, a time was arranged to have an interview over zoom video call, where Subject B was asked six questions about his experiences in childhood and his current life experiences in adulthood. Subject B interviewed on Sunday, October 29, 2023 at 2:00 pm Pacific Standard Time. I sent him a link with her zoom meeting information. He was told that his name would be kept confidential to protect his anonymity and that his personal details may be used for data collection and analysis purposes. He was informed of the purposes of the study and asked to provide his verbal consent over video, which he did. He agreed to sign a consent form, which he also did. I identified my study as being performed under the guidelines of the American Sociological Association's code of ethics and a copy of this was offered to him. He was provided with a copy of the original research plan and indicated he understood the purpose of the study and his role in

it. The following interview took about 40 minutes to complete, and was recorded for later transcribing.

When you were a child, what methods of discipline were used?

“Usually, my parents didn’t really believe in the whole, like, corporal punishment thing, but if worse came to worse, I usually got either a time out chair when I was younger, and then as I got older, I would have things taken away, like as punishment. Like the computer, for example. When I was around 8 or 9, I think I started spending an ungodly amount of time on it.”

How was conflict handled in your home?

“Conflict would always be handled by my talking out the problem. The way that I observe it in my family, usually an argument would be brought up over something like finances, bills, who’s going to work and who’s staying to watch the kid. The problem would be addressed; I’d bring up my side, they’d bring up their side.”

Subject B then indicated at the researcher’s prompting that he had felt safe disagreeing with his parents, and that conflict in childhood had not inspired a fear response in him. He had the general feeling that his needs would be met, even if he didn’t get what he wanted.

How do you cope with difficult feelings?

“I distract myself. In whatever form that may take, it may be either, like, part of it would be like workaholism but also just doomscrolling. I think in the past I would spend up until 2 or 3 in the morning just scrolling Facebook. And I’m trying to get better about that because there are times when you really need to wake up earlier. I think it also ties into another one of my bad habits, procrastination. Last minute crams, days and days of putting it off until finally I have to do this eight-hour cram session.”

How do you personally define morality?

“Morality, I think, is doing what you feel is right for the betterment of everyone, even at great personal sacrifice. Like even if it turns out you stand to lose a lot from it.”

Recall one instance when you were faced with making a difficult choice in life. How did you decide what to do?

“Summer 2020, was of course the wave of Black Lives Matter protests, there was a whole lot of police brutality killings that had been happening since, but the three big ones were: Ahmad Avery, who was killed by neighborhood vigilantes; George Floyd who killed by a cop who knelt on his neck for nine minutes; the Breonna Taylor incident where these cops barged into Taylor’s apartment apparently looking for somebody else, her partner at the time, and shot and killed her in a no knock warrant. There was a friend of mine who was a fellow music producer, and he basically shared a post on his story that kind of rubbed me the wrong way, because he was talking about Black Lives Matter protestors allegedly rioting even though a majority of the protests were actually peaceful, but also that there was the one way to be civilly disobedient, I as a white man have no moral high ground over which way to riot because in the 60’s, civil rights demonstrators did do nonviolent protests, and they had police dogs and fire hoses spraying on them and let on them. More or less, the situation with the friend was that he was basically posting things about Black Lives Matter protestors rioting, and I think I was kind of a little mad at him, he was producing stuff that was sort of in the vein of experimental hip hop and I basically wrote a call out post on instagram about it. Then another friend who I also knew since high school said that there was a lot of emotional distress that I may have caused him because of that post, and said that I should probably take it down. This is the day after, and I realized that maybe I should and I took it down. It kind of made me realize looking back just how much my conflict resolution skills, I need to work on those a bit. Or just not be afraid to have the hard conversations.”

On November 9, 2023 at 5:00 pm Pacific Standard Time Subject B was contacted again by the researcher over zoom to be asked one question, which the researcher had forgotten to ask him during his initial interview. This interview lasted approximately two minutes.

What do you do when you disagree with a friend or loved one now?

"I think the first thing I try to do is talk to them about the problem, when I can, like just articulate what I feel about it, that's if I'm

comfortable going up and telling you about it. But then there's another side of me that's like, you know, non-confrontational, so sometimes I'll delete a post [on social media]."

On November 19, 2023 at approximately 4:20 pm Pacific Standard Time, Subject B was contacted over zoom and asked one follow up question regarding impulsive and aggressive behavior. This interview lasted 3 minutes.

As an adult...

1. Have you ever struggled with impulsive or aggressive behavior, or had difficulties in self-control or emotional regulation? Can you give one example of that?

His response was as follows:

"One thing where I've been really impulsive is impulse buying. It'll usually be like an item of clothing or like a pair of shoes or jeans. I think a thing with one of my older jobs in laser tag, sometimes I would have to raise my voice because, you know, trying to get all these kids in line, sometimes I would...not like at them, I don't raise my voice at them, it's just like, "alright everyone; line up." It's not like I'm anger prone. I think my issue is more that I bottle it up."

Subject C

Age: 53

Gender: Female

Location: Washington state

Diagnosis: none

Overall EQ result: 88.57% (very high)

Morality quiz results: 96% Nurture

MES score: 7.43

Subject C was approached in person, informed of the study and asked to participate directly. She was formerly employed as my caregiver, and has no direct relation to me. I acknowledge that there may be potential power dynamic issues due to being Subject C's former employer, however, there was no additional financial compensation offered to Subject C for their optional participation in this study, and her answers did not appear to be influenced in any way by our relationship. I chose her due to my bias that having a study participant in a career field such as caregiving, which requires high empathy and nurturing skills, could potentially provide valuable data regarding how childhood experiences could affect later career choices. After consent to participate was obtained, she was sent two links to two online surveys via text and asked to screenshot and send back her results.

After the results were obtained from both quizzes, an interview was conducted in person at my residence, where Subject C was asked six questions about her experiences in childhood and her current life experiences in adulthood. Subject C interviewed on Thursday, November 9, 2023 at 3:20 pm Pacific Standard Time. Her interview was recorded on my laptop for later transcribing. She was told that her name would be kept confidential to protect her anonymity and her personal details may be used for data collection and analysis purposes. She was informed of the purposes of the study and was asked to provide her verbal consent over video, which she did. She agreed to sign a consent form, which she did as well. I identified my study as being performed under the guidelines of the American Sociological Association's code of ethics and a copy of this was offered to her. She was provided with a copy of the original research plan and indicated she understood the purpose of the study and her role in it. The following interview took about 5 minutes to complete, and was recorded for later transcribing.

When you were a child, what methods of discipline were used?

"Let's see, grounding, and I got beat with a switch from a tree. (Subject C then laughed) For really bad stuff."

How was conflict handled in your home?

“Usually we just hashed it out, like we talked about it. Or fought. It depended on who it was with. But my mom, we never sassed back to our mom. So it was usually just us kids fighting.

What do you do when you disagree with a friend or loved one now?

“I usually just tell them that I don’t agree with you. And we talk about it. Calmly.”

How do you cope with difficult feelings?

“I usually talk to a friend about them.”

How do you personally define morality?

“I think morality is doing the decent thing, doing the right thing when no one’s looking. That knowing in your heart that it’s the right thing. And when you feel like doing something bad, don’t do it.”

Recall one instance when you were faced with making a difficult choice in life. How did you decide what to do?

“Usually in my heart I know what the right decision is, but it’s always your heart and your mind doing battle, so usually I just think really hard on it, thinking, what’s the best thing for me? And then of course I talk to my friends and family about it, depending on what it was. So I would talk to them about it and see what they thought, get their opinion, what they think I should do, and then consider what they said and then basically make the ultimate decision myself.”

On November 20, 2023 at approximately Pacific Standard Time, Subject C was asked one follow up question in person regarding impulsive and aggressive behavior. This interview lasted approximately 6 minutes.

As an adult...

1. Have you ever struggled with impulsive or aggressive behavior, or had difficulties in self-control or emotional regulation? Can you give one example of that?

Her response was as follows:

“Yes, my whole life. One time my boyfriend was being mean to me, and I was sticking up for myself. And it was really frustrating. And then I was yelling and screaming, and then I smacked him. (laughs) That was a big fight. One time I whipped out my 9-millimeter. Another time I grabbed a hanger and he was like, “Oh, you want to hit me with that? Go ahead, hit me with that!” So, I picked it up and started whaling at him, broke the hanger, and he was laying on the ground going, “Ow! Ow! I didn’t know you were that strong!” And I go, well now you do. Makes me laugh now. Actually, I laughed then. He literally crawled out of the bedroom, and he was drunk, like wasted, and he slunk back in like ten or fifteen minutes later and crawled into bed like quietly so I wouldn’t wake up. That was another, he was harassing me and wouldn’t let me go to sleep and like, he knew I had to get up super early for work and I had had a long day. He just wouldn’t leave me alone; he just had to keep arguing over some bullshit that he made up in his head. And I’m like I don’t want to argue, you’re imagining shit, I just don’t want to deal with this right now. And he just kept coming in and out to wake me up, coming in and out. “Get the fuck up, get the fuck up!” I’m like, leave me alone. I need to go to work tomorrow, just leave me alone. “Get out right now!” It was bad. And it just sucked. It’s like, I think about it, like, why did I live like that, for even a second. I felt like I had no one to turn to. Then they suck you back in with their promises and they’re super nice for like a month or however long. Then it’s right back to the same old shit. I know women are like that too, but I feel like men are worse. Like there’s more men like that than women. Something is wrong with their psyche, or the way they were raised.”

Subject D

Age: 40 years old

Gender: Female

Location: Washington state

Diagnosis: Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder, suspected autism spectrum disorder

Overall EQ result: 60.47% (high)

Morality quiz results: 81% Nurture

MES score: 20.53

Subject D was informed of the study and asked to participate via text message. She is a personal friend to me, but has no direct relation to me. After consent to participate was obtained, she was sent two links to two online surveys via text and asked to screenshot and send back her results.

After the results were obtained from both quizzes, a time was arranged to have an interview over zoom video call, where Subject D was asked seven questions about her experiences in childhood and her current life experiences in adulthood. Subject D interviewed on Sunday, November 19, 2023 at 5:15 pm Pacific Standard Time. I sent her a link with the zoom meeting information. She was told that her name would be kept confidential to protect her anonymity and that her personal details may be used for data collection and analysis purposes. She was informed of the purposes of the study and asked to provide her verbal consent over video, which she did. She agreed to sign a consent form, which she also did. I identified my study as being performed under the guidelines of the American Sociological Association's code of ethics and a copy of this was offered to her. She indicated that she understood the purpose of the study and her role in it. The following interview took about 20 minutes to complete, and was recorded for later transcribing.

When you were a child, what methods of discipline were used?

"Mostly like, loss of privileges, or like having to go to your room. Yeah. I think those were the main ones."

How was conflict handled in your home?

"Oh, um, it wasn't. (laughs) You might have guessed that. Conflict...I don't even know how to talk about how conflict was handled in my home, because it wasn't. Children weren't like, people people, so like, their needs and their wants and their personhood weren't really considered equally so, like, you can't even really negotiate a conflict unless you acknowledge that the parties are equal. So we were just kind of, me and my brother, we were just expected to not cause problems and do as we were told and kind of suck it up, so there really wasn't any conflict,

like we just had to deal with whatever, I guess. Sometimes yelling, sometimes the silent treatment, but never anything constructive (laughs).”

What do you do when you disagree with a friend or loved one now?

“When I was younger, I would have said that I was just extremely conflict avoidant and I would maybe even change my behavior to avoid the conflict, now I’m more likely to bring it up with someone if I’m having a conflict. But that’s not necessarily true because actually I’m kind of having a conflict right now and I’m not addressing it (laughs), with a friend and I don’t know what’s going on with her lately, but she basically said, paraphrase, “stop talking about being Autistic around me.” Because it triggers her, but she can’t be specific about what’s triggering, and what I get is that my identity is triggering, and so lately I’ve just been totally avoiding the entire topic. And then quietly like, researching autism on my own. (laughs) So yeah, I definitely do still avoid subjects that are likely to cause conflict with people. That one blindsided me though because I didn’t expect an assertion of my identity to cause a problem for somebody else. But I guess it does. But in my, what do you call it, in my partnership, I’m more likely to bring up something that bothers me with my partner than I have been in the past, because they’re more responsive to it. So, what would I do? I’m pretty able to verbalize what’s bothering me. I don’t know what else there would be to do in resolving a conflict. It depends on the relationship, maybe. I try not to be resentful and escalate the conflict and I’ve never really done that, but I guess that’s another option. I guess if I’m not actively avoiding it then I would bring it up to them verbally.”

How do you cope with difficult feelings?

“Uh, eating. (laughs) I mean, unironically. I think we’re all having a lot of difficult feelings lately, and I noticed that food is a big coping mechanism for me. Healthy coping...how do I cope with my feelings...oh, you know, I do that Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired thing and see if there’s something physical, I can address that will help and it usually does. Not so big on physical exercise, even though I’m aware that that would probably help. Try to get some UV exposure, maybe. Go outside and look at some scenery, I’m aware that that’s supposed to help.”

How do you personally define morality?

“That’s not something I spend a lot of time thinking about, so those inventories (used for MES index) were really interesting. I haven’t really explored morality because I’m not sure it really exists. I think I have one, but I haven’t examined it much. My basic morality is not harming other people. You can’t dictate to others what they should and shouldn’t do. Although I found those three domains of morality interesting, like giving people liberty and stuff, because clearly, I don’t think people should have absolute liberty to do whatever. So, there’s something governing my morality but I’m not really sure what it is. I can’t point to anything when I was a child or anything. Maybe Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. (laughs) What was the other thing? The way that I came out Temperamental, and I’m like, yeah, well, I have my reasons (laughs) for being temperamental. And it doesn’t mean that I can’t mitigate it at all. Like I’m obviously not having meltdowns in public all the time, but yeah, I’m fairly emotional/temperamental.”

Recall one instance when you were faced with making a difficult choice in life. How did you decide what to do?

“You know what’s funny? I don’t think I identify a choice until a situation becomes untenable, and then the choice is obvious. (laughs) I was thinking about my first marriage, I had exhausted the stay option. Like I tried that and I exhausted it, so there was only one choice left. I don’t do a pros and cons list or anything. Like, if the other person’s behavior stops and they’re willing to try, then I will pursue the stay option, but then if that’s not possible then it’s go. I pursue the less painful option until it’s no longer the less painful one.”

Have you ever struggled with impulsive or aggressive behavior, or had difficulties in self-control or emotional regulation? Can you give one example of that?

“Pretty clearly, I have. (laughs) It takes me a long time to get to that point but once all my resources are exhausted and I’m melting down I guess I can behave impulsively? I was watching a TikTok or something and this autistic person was talking about how they were in meltdown mode or whatever, and when they’re in meltdown mode they’re likely to throw stuff. And I’m like, oh shit, when I meltdown I throw stuff. So

that's an example. And I remember one incident when I was a teenager and I was stressed out, my parents were less than understanding, and we were having an argument or something and I just reached the end of my rope and there was a Japanese garden trowel or something sitting around, and I just chucked it through the screen door. I'm not sure if the sliding glass had been shut, I would have chucked it, but as it was it just went through the screen. Then my mom framed that as me being destructive, I guess, but it wasn't even that, it was just impulsivity, because I had nothing left. One time I chucked a can of raisins, and this was like recent, like this summer. I had a little episode where boundaries got crossed in my relationship and I was very unhappy, and in the course of that I ended up chucking a can of raisins against the cabinet or something and they just went all over the place, like I was picking up raisins for, like, weeks, just finding them places, the raisins were pretty comical. I will try to grab something that's not going to hurt anybody, but there have been times where it was glass or sharp, so. I never chucked it at anybody but I will chuck it at the wall and whatever's on the wall. So yeah, I would say that I have an impulsivity problem. But I don't have impulsivity problems like with ADHD where I like, spend all my money or, I don't know, or move in with someone I don't know very well, like I don't have impulsivity like that. Because I avoid change, so that kind of impulsivity, no. But I think throwing stuff definitely qualifies."

Subject E

Age: 20 years old

Gender: Female

Location: Washington state

Diagnosis: Depression, Anxiety, and ADHD

Overall EQ result: 54.29% (average)

Morality quiz results: 74% Nurture

MES score: 19.71

Subject E was informed of the study in class and asked to participate in person. She was my classmate, and has no direct relation to me. After consent to participate was obtained, she was sent two links to two online surveys via text and asked to screenshot and send back her results.

After the results were obtained from both quizzes, a time was arranged to have an interview over zoom video call, where Subject E was asked seven questions about her experiences in childhood and her current life experiences in adulthood. Subject E interviewed on Monday, November 20, 2023 at 10:00 am Pacific Standard Time. I sent her a link with the zoom meeting information. She was told that her name would be kept confidential to protect her anonymity and that her personal details could be used for data collection and analysis purposes. She was informed of the purposes of the study and asked to provide her verbal consent over video, which she did. She agreed to sign a consent form, which she did. I identified my study as being performed under the guidelines of the American Sociological Association's code of ethics and a copy of this was offered to her. She indicated that she understood the purpose of the study and her role in it. The following interview took about 12 minutes to complete, and was recorded for later transcribing.

When you were a child, what methods of discipline were used?

“My books were taken away on a few occasions, sometimes I was made to sit in the corner. I was only spanked maybe, four or five times at most over the course of my life, so that wasn't really a big thing. Usually, it was things taken away. First, I would get my books taken away, and then I would get my kindle taken away when I was older, that sort of thing.”

How was conflict handled in your home?

“Pretty well. My conflict resolution skills aren't the best, I'm an only child, I didn't really have...I wasn't super social. So, I kind of have a tendency to be a bit of a doormat, something I'm working on. But, um, most of my conflict was with my mother because we didn't always quite get along. When we got in fights, we would storm off and then I would write her letters to sort of explain how I was feeling when I was a little more level headed, and that worked pretty well, actually. When I got into arguments with my parents we would wind up all sitting down in the

living room and we would have a long talk about it and then we would all share our different sides.”

What do you do when you disagree with a friend or loved one now?

“If it’s something that’s not worth starting a fight about, I just let it go. If it’s like a comment or something, it’s not super impactful for me, but if it is something I disagree with, I can try to have a discussion, a conversation where we both share our sides. I don’t really get in a lot of disagreements, but that’s because I don’t really talk to people a lot, so, yeah. I think always I should talk things over, if at all possible, even if it’s like sending messages or something. That’s really important.”

How do you cope with difficult feelings?

“Usually I sit down, and I’m angry for a little while, and I think over why I’m angry, and try to get to the bottom of it, and then I try to express this to whoever I’m disagreeing with, you know, I’m angry because of this, because I feel this way. I try to understand where they’re coming from, like, get a different perspective, and sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn’t. And I try to think about where the other person is coming from, what perspective do they have, why do they feel the way they do. Like with my parents they’ve had different lives than me, obviously, so they have a different perspective on things, and they’re older and they usually have more experience. So I try to think where are they coming from, why are they saying this, and there’s probably value in that, in why they’re saying that, and there’s a reason behind it.”

How do you personally define morality?

“I think morality is just sort of whether something is good or bad. It’s internal. It’s not like a ...like, ethics is what I would call how your actions affect other people, and they are closely tied. Morality is whether something is good or bad for reasons, like the right reasons or the wrong reasons. It’s not so easy to define, I don’t think.”

Recall one instance when you were faced with making a difficult choice in life. How did you decide what to do?

“I can’t really think of one in particular, there have been decisions, but usually I try to value the pros and cons, I guess. There’s not really

been one major decision that had super negative outcomes on both sides. I decided to drop classes in high school when I couldn't keep up and it meant, you know, not getting social security payments anymore, but at the same time I couldn't keep up with the homework load, I wasn't getting good grades, so. One that came to mind."

Have you ever struggled with impulsive or aggressive behavior, or had difficulties in self-control or emotional regulation? Can you give one example of that?

"I'm definitely inclined to take the easy way out, to put off something that's going to require effort, and just go for the instant gratification. And I do struggle with that, every time there's something that I know I need to do, I have to make the decision to do it. Every time I go out to see family or something there's a part of me that says no, stay home, sit in your room, and I have to say no, I'm not doing that. And sometimes I do get into it. That's...I think something that's part of being an adult is doing things you don't want to do and that's something I've had to learn. It's not something that comes naturally, I think to anybody."

QUIZ RESULTS:

Survey Number 1

<https://www.idrlabs.com/morality/3/test.php>

The Moral Foundations framework was developed by a conglomerate of researchers who study morality, ethics, psychology, and politics in an effort to understand human behavior better and individual differences more in depth. As a social science framework, the Moral Foundations allow for the testing of a wide variety of hypotheses about individual differences and human nature. The authors of this free online "Big Three" Moral Foundations Test are certified in the use of multiple different personality and aptitude tests and have worked professionally with psychology, political psychology, politics, and personality testing.

- Subject A scored: Nurture 72%, Tradition 40%, and Liberty 61%
- Subject B scored Nurture 100%, Tradition 56%, and Liberty 14%

- Subject C scored Nurture 96%, Tradition 73%, and Liberty 61%
- Subject D scored Nurture 81%, Tradition 43%, and Liberty 39%
- Subject E scored Nurture 74%, Tradition 49%, and Liberty 53%

Survey Number 2

<https://www.idrlabs.com/emotional-intelligence-eq/test.php>

The IDRlabs Emotional Intelligence Test (IDR-EIT) was developed by IDRlabs. The IDR-EIT is based on the work of Dr. K.V. Petrides, Ph.D., who created the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue). The IDR-EIT is not associated with any specific researchers in the field of personality psychology or any affiliated research institutions. The IDRlabs Emotional Intelligence Test was informed by the TEIQue's criteria for emotional intelligence, as published in Petrides, K. V. (2001). A psychometric investigation into the construct of emotional intelligence (Doctoral dissertation). University College London. Petrides, K. V., Mikolajczak, M., Mavroveli, S., Sanchez-Ruiz, M. J. M. J., Furnham, A., and Pérez-González, J. C. (2016). Developments in trait emotional intelligence research. *Emotion Review*, 8, 335–341. doi: 10.1177/1754073916650493 Petrides, K. V., Sanchez-Ruiz, M. J., Siegling, A. B., Saklofske, D. H., and Mavroveli, S. (2018). Emotional intelligence as personality: measurement and role of trait emotional intelligence in educational contexts. *Emotional Intelligence in Education. Integrating Research With Practice*, eds K. V. Keefer, J. D. A. Parker, and D. H. Saklofske (Cham: Springer) 49–81.

- Subject A scored: 77.38% Present, 45.24% Genuine, 73.81% Empathetic, 65.48% Resilient, 69.05% Empowering
An overall EQ score of 66.19% (High)
- Subject B scored: 52.38% Present, 61.9% Genuine, 61.9% Empathetic, 65.48% Resilient, 52.38% Empowering
An overall EQ score of 58.81% (average)
- Subject C scored: 95.24% Present, 100% Genuine, 75% Empathetic, 82.14% Resilient, 90.48% Empowering
An overall EQ score of 88.57% (very high)
- Subject D scored: 85.71% Present, 57.14% Genuine, 69.05% Empathetic, 0.26% Resilient, 85.71% Empowering
An overall EQ score of 60.47% (high)

- Subject E scored: 58.33% Present, 66.67% Genuine, 17.86% Empathetic, 50.0% Resilient, 78.57% Empowering
An overall EQ score of 54.29% (average)

The difference between Moral Foundations and Emotional Intelligence were measured by subtracting EQ scores from Morality scores ($M - E = S$) in order to measure the variations between the two for each research subject. These variations resulted in the following MES Scores.

- Subject A, $72 - 66.19 = 5.81$
- Subject B, $100 - 58.81 = 41.19$
- Subject C, $96 - 88.57 = 7.43$
- Subject D, $81 - 60.47 = 20.53$
- Subject E, $74 - 54.29 = 19.71$

DATA:

CHART A

Percentage of People Who Experienced
Punitive Discipline Methods in Childhood



CHART B

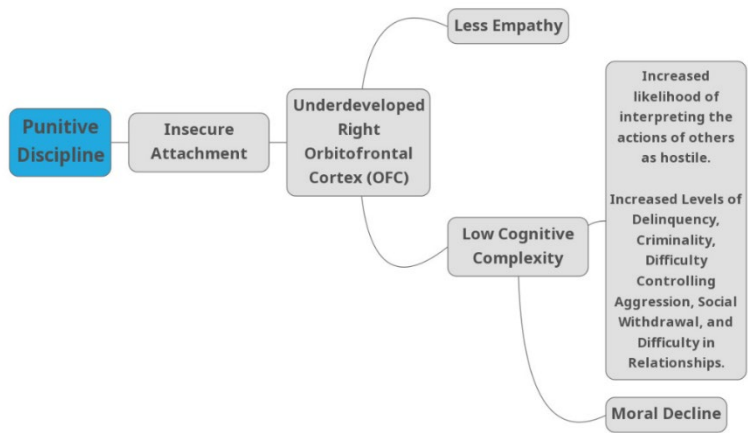
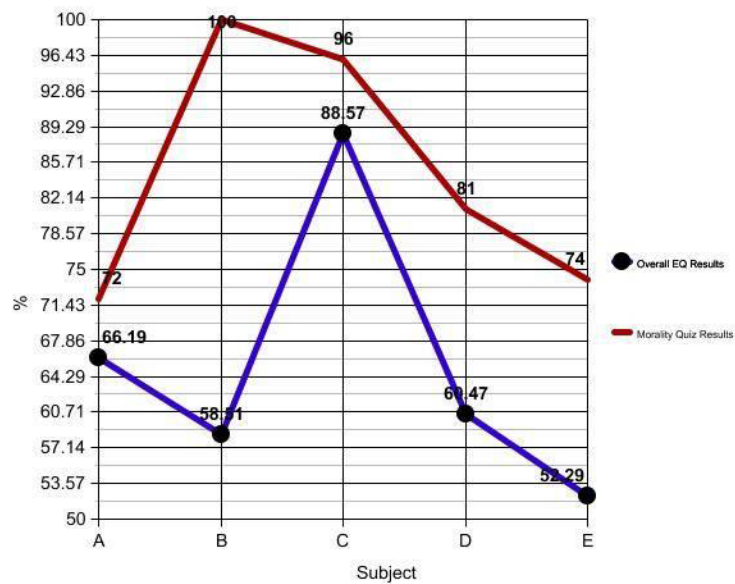


TABLE A

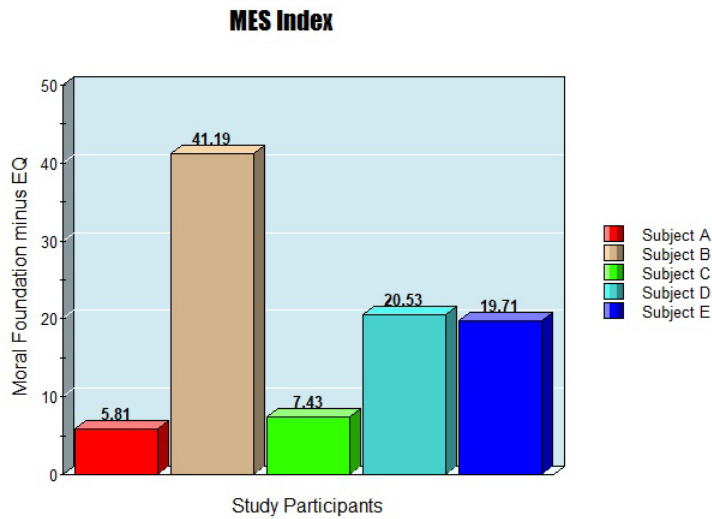
Interview Results				
	Physical Discipline	Punitive Discipline	Supportive Correction	Problems with Self Control and Emotional Regulation
Subject A	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Subject B	No	Yes	Yes	No
Subject C	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Subject D	No	Yes	No	Yes
Subject E	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Conclusions: 100% of all five subjects interviewed experienced some form of punitive discipline throughout their childhood. 60% of the subjects questioned still struggle with emotionally regulating themselves. The absence of physical discipline for Subject D did not mitigate the self control and self regulation difficulties that followed their experiences with punitive discipline due to an absence of supportive correction. The same 40% of subjects that do not have difficulties with their emotions or behaviors are the same 40% of subjects who experienced supportive correction in childhood.

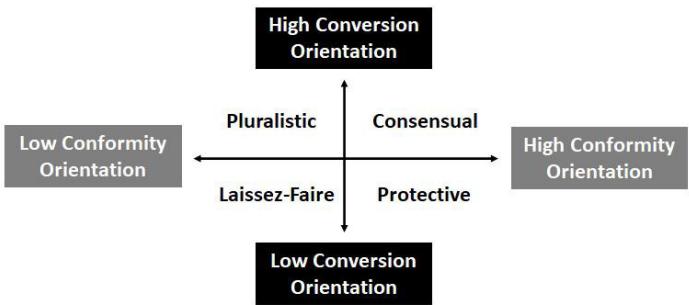
GRAPH A



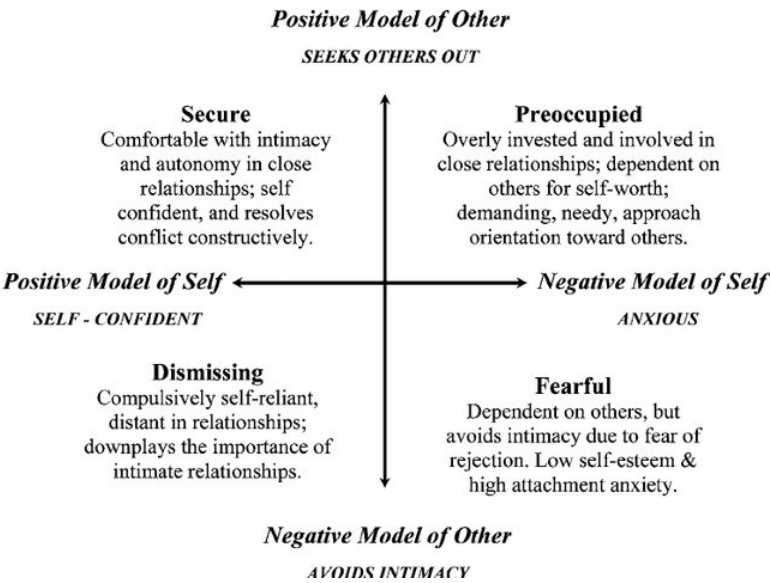
GRAPH B



MODEL A: Family Communications Theory. (OKPTA, 2020)



MODEL B: Attachment Theory. (Henderson, Bartholomew, Trinke and Kwong, 2005)



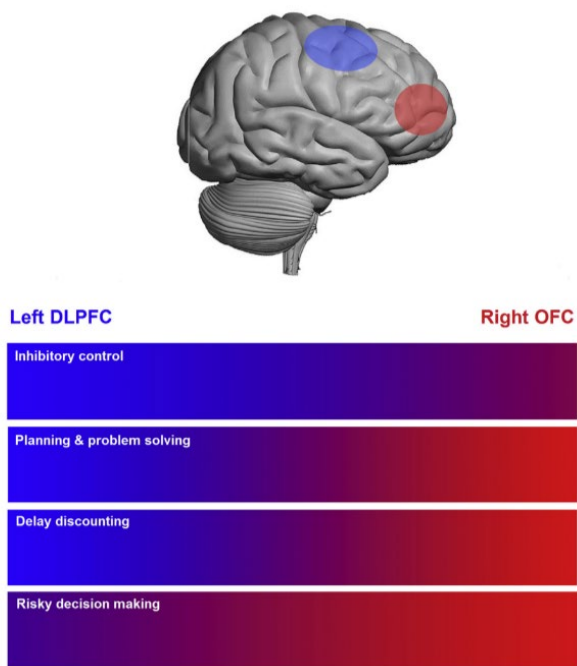
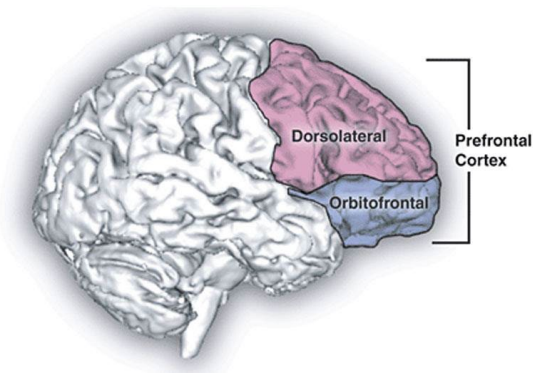


Fig. 3. Executive functions on a hot-cold spectrum benefitting from the left DLPFC-right OFC activity.

FIGURE A (above): (Vahid, et. al., 2018);
(below) FIGURE B: (Yin, 2023)



Subjects of this study were asked to complete two separate online quizzes from IDR Labs (IDRLabs, 2023). The first quiz measured the subject's Moral Foundations, which tests morality in three areas; Nurture, Tradition, and Liberty. The second quiz measured the subject's Overall Emotional Intelligence and EQ over five separate categories; Present, Genuine, Empathetic, Resilient, and Empowering. These quizzes were chosen to contrast the overall EQ data with the measured levels of Nurture Morality and then explore any possible correlation. (Graph A)

The numbers obtained from the overall Emotional Intelligence score (E) subtracted from the Moral Foundations quiz (M) measured the subject's standard deviation between emotional acuity and moral sensibility in individuals. I created the mathematical formula ($M - E = S$). The variance between the two quiz scores ($M - E$) resulted in a (S) score called a MES index rating, which I compared to my subject's interview data (Graph B). These standard deviations, combined with the subject's qualitative data correlated the lower scores with the two subjects who experienced the highest levels of punitive discipline and who both self-reported having recent legal difficulties, Subjects A and C. Subject B may indicate a relationship between higher levels of cognitive complexity with supportive discipline methods being used during childhood.

Further studies to gather more data comparisons would be recommended for more accurate analysis and conclusions on the disparities between morality, cognitive complexity, emotional intelligence and their relationship with how childhood discipline and parent attachment styles relate to development in the prefrontal cortex. I concluded at the time of this writing, based on the results of all five interviews, that punitive discipline's effects on self-control and emotional regulation, and how those two factors relate to an individual's conscious versus unconscious choices, impact an individual's abilities to consciously act on their morals and beliefs. The data I obtained (Graph B) correlated experiencing supportive discipline in childhood with wider deviations between morality and EQ, indicating greater cognitive complexity in the subjects. Larger deviations (more than 10) between morality and emotional intelligence may indicate a maturing prefrontal cortex, while a smaller MES index number (less than 10) may indicate an immature prefrontal cortex. Morality and EQ are both associated with the same area of the brain that

is damaged or remains underdeveloped through use of punitive discipline, or after experiencing relational or other psychological traumas.

Subject A reported experiencing both physical and punitive discipline methods in childhood, but did not recount any supportive discipline methods such as communication or connection. The main methods of conflict resolution used in the home were avoidance and explosive anger, which are the same learned behaviors that Subject A reports employing themselves currently as an adult. Subject A recounted using avoidance through escapism to deal with stress such as was modeled by caregivers in their childhood home, and they related recent issues with explosive anger causing problems in their adult life.

Subject B reported experiencing some minor punitive punishments, but overall, his parents relied heavily on supportive correction such as communication and creating a healthy loving bond with their child where he felt safe and supported. He reported having some executive functioning issues such as procrastination, and has experienced some impulsivity which could relate to his autism diagnosis. He did not report any issues with anger or explosive emotions but does admit to having the tendency to avoid his feelings.

Subject C reported being beaten physically as a child, and then recounted multiple incidents of physical altercations with romantic partners as an adult. No conflict resolution was modeled for her in childhood, which resulted in a lack of these crucial skills when grown. Her patterns of communication and emotional regulation, similar to Subject A, mirror the patterns of communication and regulation modeled to her as a child.

Subject D reported that her family home relied heavily on avoidance and punitive measures of discipline as a child. She also experienced verbal abuse. There was no supportive correction present. She reported current issues with using food to regulate her emotions, problems with impulse control and anger management, and mentioned that several of her adult relationships mimic the patterns of having her boundaries crossed by caregivers in childhood.

Subject E reported that they experienced both physical and punitive methods of discipline in childhood, but additionally did experience some supportive discipline, which may correlate to her functioning levels of

self-control and regulation in adulthood. There may be possible correlations between being sat in the corner for time out in childhood and the difficulties leaving her room she now experiences as an adult. It should be noted that Subject E had the lowest overall EQ rating, which may be accounted for by the fact that she was an only child and lacked opportunities for social interaction among peer groups.

Study Results:

- (Refer to Table A)
 - Physical Discipline: Subjects A, C and E
 - Punitive Discipline (time out, removal of privileges): Subjects A, B, C, D, and E (Chart A)
 - Supportive Correction: Subjects B and E
 - Current Problems with Emotional Dysregulation: Subjects A, C and D
- (Refer to Graph B)
 - Subjects A and C both scored below a 10, which was significant because both subjects did not experience supportive discipline in childhood and did experience physical and punitive discipline:
 - Subject A scored a 5.81 while Subject C scored 7.43.
 - The subjects who scored above a 10 also reported experiencing significantly less current social and emotional difficulties than Subjects A and C.
 - Subjects E, D, and B did not report experiencing physical discipline and Subjects E and B reported experiencing supportive discipline.
 - Subject E, 19.71; Subject D, 20.53; Subject B, 41.19.

(Refer to Chart B)

Evaluating the data trends and patterns resulted in an observable relationship between physical and punitive discipline, the absence of supportive discipline methods, and insecure attachment. This may result in a poorly developed right OFC in the prefrontal cortex of the brain (Figure A), lower empathy, less cognitive complexity, declining morals, and increased levels of delinquency, criminality, difficulty controlling aggression, social withdrawal and difficulty in relationships, and being more likely to interpret the actions of others as hostile (Figure B). These trends

are consistent with the preexisting literature and research on these areas of study.

- (Refer to Models A and B)
Correlations and significant overlap between Attachment Theory and Family Communications Theory were observed in responses from all five research subjects.

Conclusion:

The results contained herein affirm the central role that attachment plays as a mediator to both symptomology and recovery of relational and complex trauma. This study shows that supportive correction in the form of connection, empathy and understanding in childhood mitigated emotional regulation difficulties that result in impulsive or aggressive behaviors as an adult. Based on the qualitative data, 100% of all five subjects interviewed experienced some form of punitive discipline throughout their childhood. (Chart A) 60% of the subjects questioned still struggle with emotionally regulating themselves. The absence of physical discipline for Subject D did not mitigate the self-control and self-regulation difficulties that followed their experiences with punitive discipline due to an absence of supportive correction. The same 40% of subjects that do not have difficulties with their emotions or behaviors were the same 40% of subjects who experienced supportive correction in childhood. (Table A) The two subjects who experienced physical discipline had the lowest MES index scores, which measure the mathematical deviation between morality and emotional intelligence quiz scores. Numerous studies supporting these findings have been referenced throughout this paper, providing a clear direct link between the communication that children receive from their parents in childhood and their behavior in adulthood. This paper opens up an opportunity for future academic dialogue; as Dr. Lori Desautels (2020) said, “we will need to be intentional about what lies beneath the behaviors ...restorative practices mean very little if we are not connecting to the experiences.” The findings from this study highlight the importance of further research. “Only recently has research begun to look at the extent to which improvement in attachment organization is related to improvement in outcome.” (Muller, et. al., 2012, page 252)

Making a cultural shift away from using punitive consequences by adopting supportive parenting methods that use pluralistic communication patterns could dramatically increase the Western population's overall mental health. There are visually observable similarities between Family Communications Theory and Attachment Theory (Models A and B) and a relationship between how a family communicates with each other, particularly during times of conflict, and to how attached and safe they feel. This study confirms that overlap and the subsequent effects on the development of the prefrontal cortex during childhood using MES index scoring. These study results indicate that discipline has a direct impact on the formation of the same brain structures, particularly the right orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), that are responsible for development of morality and emotional intelligence. Mueller, et. al. connected deviant behavior with attachment, supporting the field data gathered here, and reinforced this research project's thesis when they stated that "evidence of a link between attachment insecurity and psychopathology is well established in the literature." Through the qualitative interviews provided by the five subjects involved, this paper concludes that the presence of secure attachment and the use of supportive discipline methods in childhood will increase cognitive complexity measurably as an adult.

Proposed Follow Up Study:

I have designed the following experiment as a follow up to the Western Parenting research to further determine whether punitive discipline methods like coercive control, timeouts, yelling, and spanking contribute to long term deficits in emotional regulation, cognitive development, and social functioning. In this experimental design, the independent variable would be the type of discipline method used by parents, while the dependent variables would include measures of the child's emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and behavioral functioning. I would recruit a sample of 60 families with children between the ages of 5 and 7 and randomly assign them to one of two groups. The control group would continue using conventional Western discipline methods (like time-outs, spanking, or yelling), while the experimental group would receive a 4-week training in trauma informed, non-punitive parenting based on coregulation and attachment repair. We would measure each child's emotional and cognitive functioning before the intervention and again after six months, using standardized tools like the Emotion Regulation

Checklist, the BRIEF for cognitive flexibility, and possibly teacher rated behavioral assessments. By comparing outcomes across the two groups, we could examine whether non-punitive parenting leads to measurable improvements in emotional regulation and executive functioning. I would also control for confounding variables like socioeconomic status and neurodivergence. My hypothesis is that children in the non-punitive group will show significantly greater gains in self-regulation, cognitive adaptability, and prosocial behavior, while children in the punitive group may show stagnation or worsening in these areas. This experiment could provide causal evidence for what I argued here in Western Parenting, that coercive discipline doesn't just suppress behavior in the short term, it undermines longer term neurological and emotional development and impacts life trajectory.

Hypothesis:

Children exposed to non-punitive, coregulation-based discipline will show significantly higher levels of emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility over time than children exposed to punitive discipline methods like spanking, timeouts, yelling, coercive control.

Independent Variable:

Parenting Style (manipulated via caregiver training)

Group A: Punitive discipline (control group, standard methods)

Group B: Non-punitive discipline (experimental group, trauma-informed coregulation training)

Dependent Variable:

(Child outcomes measured after 6 months)

Emotional regulation measured via the Emotion Regulation Checklist

Cognitive flexibility measured via Dimensional Change Card Sort task or BRIEF scale

Behavioral functioning measured via teacher-rated SDQ or CANS scores

Prefrontal activity measured via EEG or fNIRS for brain-based markers

Research Study Participants (to be recruited via targeted ads online on parenting websites, posts in parenting support groups on social media, flyers posted in public bulletin boards, word of mouth and networking, etc.):

60 families with children ages 5–7

Randomly assigned to punitive vs. non-punitive parenting training groups

Pre-screened to control for SES (Socioeconomic Status), trauma history, and preexisting diagnosis or health conditions

Experimental Procedures:

1. Pretest: Baseline emotional and cognitive functioning measured in all children

2. Parent Training Intervention:

Group A receives no special training (continues standard Western punitive methods)

Group B receives a 4-week course in trauma-informed, relational coregulation strategies

3. 6 Month Observation Period:

Weekly logs by parents

Teacher evaluations

In home behavioral assessments

4. Posttest: Reassess emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and behavior

Control Measures:

Random assignment to prevent selection bias

Standardized assessment tools

Expected Results:

If my hypothesis is correct, children in the non-punitive group will show:

Improved emotion regulation

Greater impulse control

Higher cognitive flexibility

More prosocial behavior

Whereas children in the punitive group may show no significant change, stagnation or even a decline in these areas.

Ethical Considerations:

No child will be newly subjected to punitive methods; Group A represents the status quo

All families are debriefed and offered access to non-punitive training post-study

Informed consent obtained from parents or guardians and children.

It should be noted for clarification purposes that when I say "standard Western punitive parenting practices" I am basing that off of UNICEF data that has shown:

Approximately 2 in 3 children ages 1-14 regularly experience violent discipline, through physical punishment and/or psychological aggression at home as reported by time.com and unicef.org (that's 1.6 billion world-wide).

Nearly 400 million children under age 5 regularly experience violent discipline

Roughly 1.2 billion children are exposed to corporal punishment

By the 5th grade, around 80% of American children have been punished physically.

These UNICEF estimates are derived from various data sources, such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), conducted between 2005 and 2013. The MICS program is the main source for comparable national data on violent discipline.

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Shooting Yourself in the Foot and Cutting Off Your Nose to Spite Your Face

How Social Class in the U. S. is
Preventing Collective Human
Evolution and Species Advancement

Social class significantly affects child development in the United States. While common perceptions of class involve a hierarchy with richer people at the top holding the majority of economic resources and the bottom retaining the least amount, sociologists view class as categories of shared circumstances and perspectives (Cohen 2014, p.120; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt, 2019). This view highlights distinct differences between groups as well as illustrates why social mobility and moving between groups is difficult if not impossible for lower classes. The division of labor was the focus of early sociologists such as Durkheim, and Marx brought up concerns about economic exploitation, but these early focuses on material goods and the economy largely ignored the effects that class division has on human, child and social development. Weber's concept of life chances focused on differences in opportunities that people get to achieve success, but he focused on the practical realm. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed the idea of social capital, which is what resources a person has access to, by virtue of their relationships and social connections; the amount of capital one retains socially is largely dependent on how high an individual's class status is (Cohen 2014, p.122).

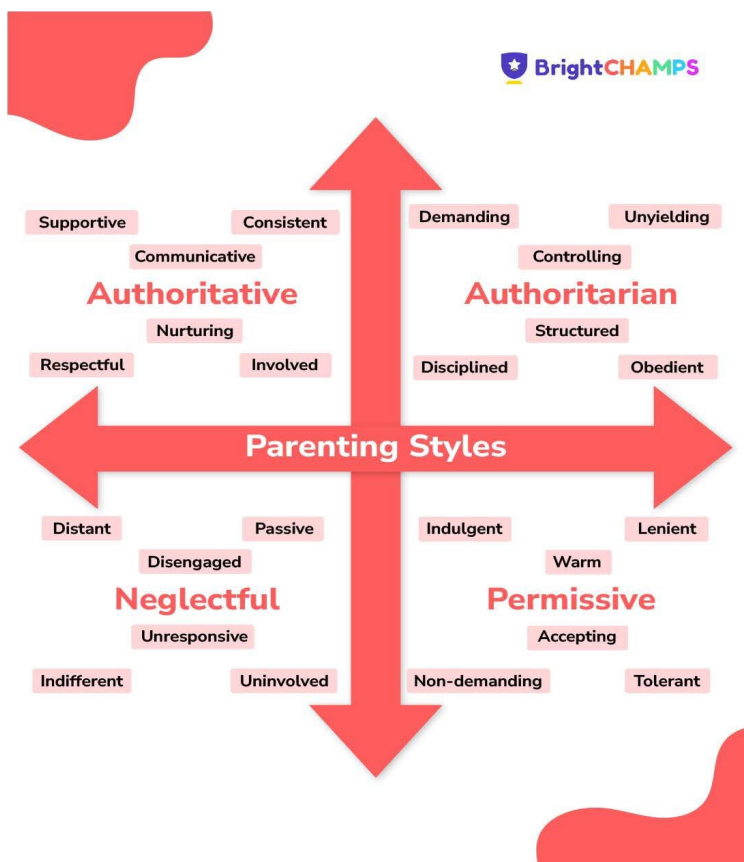
One of the most significant ways that social class impacts child development is by limiting cultural competency, or the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate with people from diverse backgrounds. Furstenburg explained many ways that social class affects life outcome in a predetermined way. These include:

1. The cognitive and emotional foundation that is formed in the first few years of life (Risman and Rutter 2015, p. 525)
2. The mother's prenatal experiences such as exposure to toxins, diet, quality of prenatal and neonatal healthcare (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.525)
3. Genetic variation by social class (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.525)
4. The consequences of attachment and how it affects transitions to adolescence and early adulthood (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.525-526)
5. A child's exposure to reading and remediation (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.526)
6. The verbal environment and a family's communication style (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.526)
7. Parent's education levels (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.526)
8. Differences in child rearing practices across social classes (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.527)
9. Cultural learning opportunities outside the home (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.527)
10. Peer interaction and socialization in general (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.527-528)
11. Exposure to peers outside of their social classes (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.527-528)
12. Availability of resources: money, time, energy (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.527, 528)
13. The environment within institutional settings (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.526, 528)

In Western Parenting Impacts... I researched the ways that attachment impacts behavior, long term development and how that can impact life chances. I discovered that there is a very strong correlation between attachment and family communication styles (Snow 2024; 2024). By overlying the quadrants of attachment theory with family communications theory, my work exposed correlations between ruptures in attachment experienced in childhood with family communication styles that are oriented towards high conflict with low context. My study showed that significant changes to the brain, cognitive process and behavior

result from these environments which significantly impact child development and later life chances as an adult.

Class trains people into power-over instead of power-with dynamics, with the lower classes who have the least amount of control in their lives exerting the most amount of control over their children, mirroring the authoritarian style of the U.S. government within their smaller family system. Furstenburg addressed how parents who are more affluent tend to be more educated and therefore more knowledgeable about child developmental norms, and thus are able to change their expectations for their children's behaviors accordingly, whereas lower classes tend to adopt more negative views regarding children's behaviors and development due to these parents lacking in the same opportunities, resources, knowledge, skills, and privileges. This creates lower levels of cultural competency and stunts the development of children in lower classes who lack the same social, cultural, and psychological capital as those in higher social positions (Risman and Rutter 2015, p.523). Data from the Furstenburg article showed that 42 percent of children born into the bottom fifth of income distribution will remain there as adults. Only 7% make it to the top one-fifth (Hertz, 2009). While the U.S. may believe that hard work and determination can bring social mobility, these figures expose the ethos of the "American Dream" national ideal as a scam and fraud, because lower classes lack the same opportunities and life chances to escape their generational traumas and class circumstances. "A single woman who lives with her children is especially likely to fall into poverty, or to be unable to rise out of it" (Cohen 2014, p.136). The book *Promises I can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* discusses the growing number of single mothers as an increasing crisis and documents the pattern of emotionally turbulent, unstable relationships with men that keep women stuck in poverty and trapped in this cycle (Edin and Keflas, 2005).



Generational trauma refers to the number and impact of traumatic events experienced by one generation which are then passed down to another. Although poverty is not always classified as a trauma in itself, its chronic stressors and systemic barriers can produce generational trauma with lasting psychological, biological, and developmental effects. Being in a lower income bracket affects every aspect of life from parenting choices to nutrition and diet to education, all of which affect child development. Neglect, abuse, and household dysfunction are known to cause Adverse Childhood Experiences (CDC, 2025), and ACEs have been found to be more prevalent in families and communities

made vulnerable by poverty. The Intersectional Nature of ACEs Framework showed how environments shape high-risk conditions and cited recent studies which have also linked newly identified ACEs with higher risks for negative outcomes, such as poverty, poor mental health, behavior problems, and risky behaviors (Camacho, 2022). Childhood trauma can rewire the brain and nervous system, leading to lasting changes in emotional regulation and physical health. Areas like the amygdala and prefrontal cortex are deeply affected, often causing anxiety, hypervigilance, or chronic illness in adults. However, healing is possible through neuroplasticity and trauma-informed therapies (Bremner, 2006; Sherin, et al, 2011; Pa-C. 2025) because human development is a fluid spectrum.

The idea that poverty and trauma can physically rewire the brain is both shocking and deeply important because it reframes inequality not just as an economic issue, but as a biological and developmental one. Research shows that chronic stress in childhood, often associated with poverty, neglect, or instability, floods the developing brain with stress hormones like cortisol. This disrupts the growth of key regions such as the amygdala, which becomes hyper-reactive and heightens fear and vigilance, and the prefrontal cortex, which is essential for decision-making, impulse control, and planning for the future. The hippocampus, critical for memory and learning, is also vulnerable to stress-related shrinkage. Together, these changes make it harder for individuals to regulate emotions, focus, or envision long-term goals, creating biological barriers to escaping cycles of poverty. This is significant because it helps explain why poverty persists across generations, not simply because of lack of resources, but because of embodied neurobiological adaptations to unsafe environments. Yet this does not mean such outcomes are fixed or inevitable. The principle of neuroplasticity shows that the brain can form new pathways throughout life, especially when individuals are given safe, supportive, and relational environments. Trauma-informed therapies, mindfulness, co-regulation, and access to stable relationships can gradually reduce hypervigilance, strengthen executive functioning, and restore nervous system balance. Understanding human development as a fluid spectrum shifts the narrative from inevitability to possibility: even if poverty and trauma alter the brain, healing and transformation remain possible when relational and systemic conditions of safety are restored.

With determination and the proper support in place, any human can succeed at any point in time. These early impacts don't simply fade; they compound and re-emerge later in life. Numerous studies regarding mid-life crises have shown that midlife distress is a continuation of earlier life patterns, not a normative phase experienced universally. The idea of mid-life as a return to unresolved psychic issues strongly supports the idea of human development as a nuanced continuum and a spectrum, not a linear or static process as is typically understood by institutions, media and academia. (de Montero et al, 2019; Schmidt, 2020; Brennan et al, 2023). While midlife crises can affect people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, research suggests that individuals facing financial hardship and poverty may be more susceptible to experiencing psychological distress and related challenges during this stage of life (Lang et al, 2011).

It is evident that social class significantly impacts development and subsequent life choices and opportunities available in every possible way. For this reason and many others, I am a strong advocate for a Universal Basic Income. Durkheim introduced the idea of a collective consciousness which is the shared beliefs, values, norms and moral attitudes that are shared by a group. My Western Parenting Impacts... study (Snow 2024; 2024) discussed in depth how the high conflict communication and insecure attachment styles of the lower classes affect the entire collective, effectively delaying development of our culture and preventing further human evolution from occurring. My later work has focused on using systems theory to show how these patterns of trauma shape our social norms and even our laws and government (Snow, 2025) using systems theories, somewhat similar to the Interactive Circles of Socialization (Cohen 2014, p.180-181). At what point do we recognize that the human race is deeply interconnected and interdependent and the success of one predicate the success of each other? Nick Hanauer, a self-identified plutocrat, discussed an emergent need for his capitalist class to fix the "glaring economic inequalities in our society" (TED, 2014), noting that inequality is terrible for business. It is also terrible for human development.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a social policy model in which every individual within a society receives a guaranteed, unconditional sum of money on a regular basis, usually monthly, regardless of employment status, wealth, or social class. Unlike welfare programs that are

means-tested or conditional, UBI provides income to everyone without requirements, ensuring a stable financial foundation. The purpose of UBI is not to make people wealthy but to guarantee a baseline of security that allows basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare to be consistently met. By doing so, UBI directly addresses class imbalances: it reduces the chronic stress and instability associated with poverty, helps level the playing field between social classes, and allows individuals to pursue education, creative endeavors, caregiving, or meaningful work without the constant fear of destitution. In terms of development, UBI has the potential to reduce the intergenerational transmission of trauma by creating conditions of emotional and material safety, which neuroscience shows are critical for healthy brain development, secure attachment, and long-term well-being.

Universal Basic Income as a Developmental Intervention

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is more than an economic policy; it is a developmental intervention with the potential to reshape the collective consciousness of society. By guaranteeing every individual an unconditional financial baseline, UBI reduces the chronic stress and survival anxiety that are deeply intertwined with insecure attachment patterns and high-conflict communication in lower socioeconomic classes. Neuroscience shows that when families live in constant precarity, the nervous system remains in sympathetic activation (fight-or-flight) or dorsal vagal collapse (shutdown), leaving little capacity for emotional regulation, empathy, or long-term planning. UBI interrupts this cycle by ensuring that basic needs are consistently met, allowing nervous systems to settle into states of safety where secure attachment and healthy relational dynamics become possible.

Impact on Collective Consciousness

Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness emphasizes that the beliefs, values, and emotional climate of individuals accumulate into shared cultural norms. *Western Parenting Impacts...* (Snow, 2024) demonstrates how insecure attachment patterns in lower classes ripple outward to affect the entire culture, delaying human development and preventing the emergence of higher levels of relational maturity. When poverty generates widespread dysregulation, conflict, and insecurity, the

collective consciousness becomes infused with fear, scarcity thinking, and adversarial relationships. UBI addresses this imbalance by stabilizing the most vulnerable households, reducing the frequency of relational trauma at the micro level, and thereby improving the emotional climate of the macro system. Over time, healthier family dynamics and reduced stress contribute to a cultural shift toward empathy, cooperation, and long-term thinking.

UBI as a Pathway for Cultural Evolution

From an evolutionary and sociological perspective, UBI creates the conditions necessary for society to move beyond survival-based functioning. When individuals are freed from constant financial insecurity, they are more likely to pursue education, creative work, caregiving, and community involvement, all of which enrich cultural development. This mirrors Maslow's insight that higher-order needs such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization cannot flourish until basic needs are secured. By stabilizing the foundation, UBI accelerates the transition from a culture organized around survival and competition to one capable of prioritizing innovation, collective problem-solving, and global cooperation.

Toward Human Evolution

Insecure attachment, conflict, and fear-based survival strategies anchor humanity to repetitive cycles of trauma, preventing the emergence of new paradigms of connection and governance. UBI offers a structural mechanism for breaking these cycles. By embedding financial safety into the social contract, UBI reduces child neglect and intergenerational trauma, fosters more secure attachments, and increases the capacity for reflective, relational parenting. These micro-level improvements accumulate into a cultural-level transformation: a collective consciousness no longer dominated by fear, but instead oriented toward growth, empathy, and shared responsibility. In this way, UBI can be seen as not just an economic policy but a tool for human evolution, creating the conditions for cultural maturation and the advancement of human potential.

Carl Jung spoke of collective consciousness as an agreed upon consensus reality, and also spoke of the existence of a collective unconscious, which is an assortment of memories and meanings that are shared universally across all cultures. Humanity's social being determines both

individual and collective consciousness (Appelrouth and Edles, 2021, p.51) therefore reaching the full human potential, or what Marx referred to as “species being,” will require establishing a foundation of social and economic equality.

Plan B Society: Gender Role Conflict, Domestic Inequality, and the Unraveling of Modern Partnership

Changing understandings of gender roles and the impact that this recent cultural shift has had on family life has demanded new relational roles faster than men and women have been able to adapt to and fill them. This has caused conflict and strain between men and women when it comes to both breadwinning and responsibilities at home. The essay “Falling Back on Plan B: The Children of the Gender Revolution Face Uncharted Territory” by Kathleen Gerson (Risman & Rutter, p. 593-608) is particularly useful in illuminating this divide as well as identifying contributing factors as to why this might be occurring. Modern adults (Gen X and beyond) were generally the first generation of children who grew up with mothers who worked outside the home (R&R, p. 593). These “children of the gender revolution” walk a fine line between their desire to achieve egalitarian partnerships that blend work equitably and attempting to resist succumbing to the reality of gender conflict, fragile relationships, and uncertain job prospects. Most modern couples today hold an ideal of blending traditional values of lifelong commitment with flexibility, shared work and domestic chores along with equal caregiving responsibilities (R&R, p. 594). These cultural ideals generally fail when expectations do not meet reality because men and women still have differing goals individually.

As a default or “Plan B” men tend to have neo-traditional values which involve seeing themselves as the primary breadwinner where their own goals are centered and come first, whereas women have become more self-reliant and are de-centering men in their lives (R&R, p. 595). In many cases men and women are competing for who gets to take the lead position, as opposed to both taking cooperative and supportive roles with each other. The common denominator in positive outcomes and narratives is the ability of parents and other caretakers to recognize duties in more flexible and less gender conforming ways (R&R, p. 598). Traditional attitudes regarding who has the control in the relationship and the

unresolved power struggles that these attitudes cause have created issues for women who are left carrying the weight of “doing it all” (R&R, p. 599) and men’s resistance to more flexible gender arrangements has left them unable to sustain emotionally and economically secure relationships and homes (R&R, p. 600). This ultimately leads to a divergence in outcomes, where following the failure of a relationship as a primary form of support, women are becoming more independent, seeking financial and emotional self-reliance.

Gerson states that when the bonds of marriage are so fragile, relying on a man seems foolish without the means to escape or recover (R&R, p. 602). Meanwhile, men opt to put their careers first, with 7/10 men pursuing a strategy to position themselves as the main breadwinner and being unwilling to accept equal share of parenting or caregiving duties (R&R, p. 604) which is an ineffective strategy to maintain a relationship as this continues to place additional strain on women. Men’s desire to protect and provide is at odds with women’s needs for equality and autonomy (R&R, p. 605). This Plan B society results in both genders hypofunctioning alone while neither is getting their primary needs for intimacy and emotional support met by a partner.

The essay “Betwixt and Be Tween: Gender Contradictions among Middle Schoolers” by Barbara J. Risman and Elizabeth Seale (Risman & Rutter, p. 570–592) highlights how gender divides persist because masculinity, in particular, is still heavily policed, with boys facing intense ridicule if they deviate from traditional roles (R&R, p. 589). This dynamic reflects a broader cultural trend in which pressures to conform to rigid gender norms are resurfacing in new forms. One striking example is the recent growth of the “trad wife” movement, an online and cultural phenomenon in which women themselves advocate for a return to highly traditional gender roles, encouraging other women to embrace domesticity, submit to male authority, and “get back into the kitchen.” Much like the middle schoolers who enforce gender boundaries, the trad wife movement shows how women can also participate in reproducing patriarchal norms by disciplining one another into conformity. This illustrates how gender policing does not only come from men toward women, but can also be internalized and enacted by women themselves, reinforcing structural inequalities under the guise of cultural or moral values.

While girls in middle school have begun to “undo gender” performances in their own lives, boys deviating from any behavior other than traditional definitions of masculinity and resembling any remote stereotype as feminine is still intensely policed by other boys as well as some girls (R&R, p. 589). Being stigmatized as gay is about deviating from gender expectations and rigid cultural norms. This resistance to redefining masculinity is a contributing factor to the unresolved power struggles pervading modern relationships, and boys remaining resistant to feminist transformation results in women increasingly carrying heavier burdens and “doing it all” so they logically assume that if they are going to have to do it themselves, they might as well do it alone without the added strain an unequal relationship causes them. Or in other words, “I can do bad by myself” (Edin & Keflas, p. 81).

Marriage’s declining social value has created a cultural crisis (Cohen, p. 274) as the growth of individualism and the goals of self-fulfillment and self-expression have weakened the ties of marriage (Cohen, p. 275), with marriage rates falling dramatically since the 1960’s. (Cohen, p. 276) and becoming increasingly concentrated among higher income and education. One reason for this is economics (Cohen, p. 277), with economic insecurity undermining people’s prospects for marriage and economic independence freeing people from a need to marry (Cohen, p. 283). Women’s increasing independence reduces incentives for men to marry due to a “dwindling supply of free labor” that marriage used to imply for men and the growth of the double income family juxtaposed with lower levels of marriage among the poor increases the income gap between rich and poor families (Cohen, p. 288). Avishai, Heath and Randles wrote in “The Marriage Movement” (Risman & Rutter, p. 304-328) that “changing patterns in family life have accelerated in the second half of the 20th century and are contributing to class inequalities” (R&R, p. 306).

Men’s participation in “second shift” or unpaid caregiving and household labor duties has increased over the past 50 years with men contributing more domestically, but the divide still unequally places the burden of unpaid labor on women. The simple fact of women being cast in the role of the emotional caretakers with men remaining rational, cold, and emotionally distant establishes the foundation for gender inequality throughout society (Cohen, p. 173), and the tendency of mothers to take primary responsibilities for child rearing appears to be the basis of

modern gender identities. Rigid gender roles and categories serve a male dominated society where gender inequality is still central to family life (Cohen, p. 172) and men have more influence over social rules, so they set the standard to serve their interests. This includes the practice of weaponized incompetence, or doing the bare minimum in household and caretaking duties to give the impression of being an involved partner without actually doing equitable amounts of labor. The family is where gender expression is learned and practiced, and male and female role definitions reinforce inequality in other areas such as race and social class (Cohen, p. 173).

Patriarchal ownership establishes social attitudes that devalue women, making their labor and subjugation invisible while the work they do sustains the very capitalist control system keeping them burdened unfairly and maintains an environment centered on men through dominant male hierarchy. Unpaid work performed by women worldwide, primarily in caregiving and domestic tasks, is estimated to be worth approximately \$10.8 trillion annually according to Oxfam. This figure is based on the estimated value if this work were compensated at minimum wage. This contribution is a significant amount, exceeding the revenue of many large global corporations. Women, who have been conditioned not to know their value or worth by a culture founded on exploiting them, have suffered silently for generations.

While I may agree on the necessity of UBI, I find it interesting that men only began to value unpaid labor and secondary jobs once it began to affect their own wallets and livelihoods, completely ignoring the fact that women have been providing unpaid labor and secondary jobs to men since the start of patriarchy. It's difficult for men to feel empathy for women because they still view them as inferior and weaker individuals (Cohen, p. 161), a view of early philosophers that continues to dominate social practices and cultural gender norms to this day. The idea of women as the weaker and inferior sex corresponds to the pattern of male domination in modern society (Cohen, p. 164), with the ideas of men as people and women as "less than" being rooted in Western religious traditions which view men as the first person to be created (Adam and Eve) (Cohen, p. 165).

Uncoupling the Self

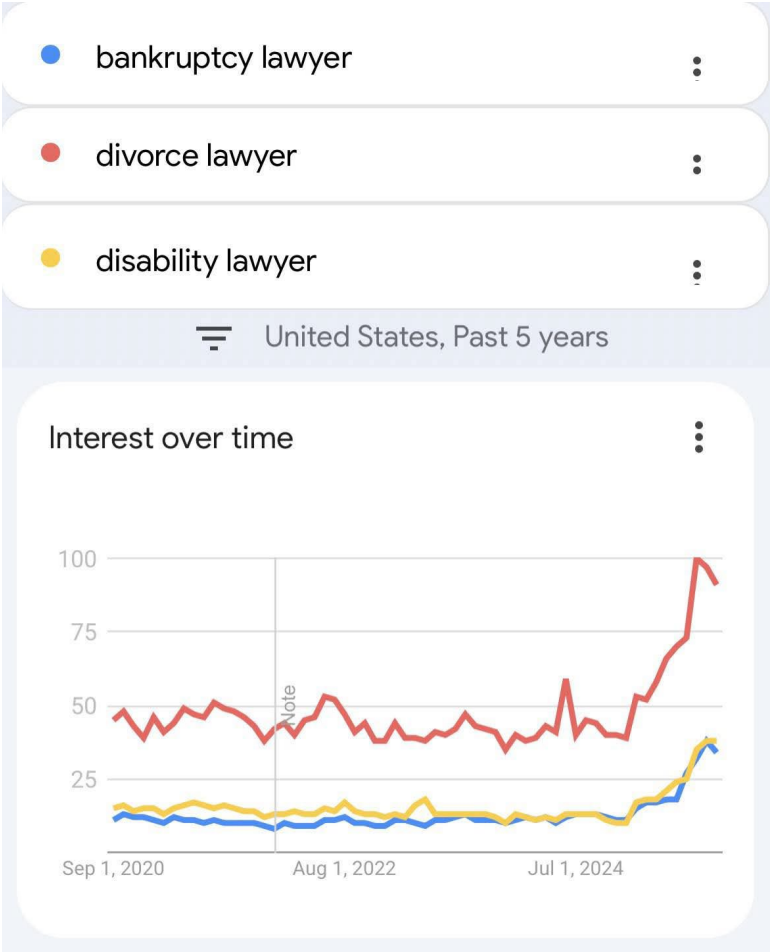
How Western Individualism Undermines Marriage, Connection, and Collective Wellbeing

This essay further explores the false binaries imposed by colonialism and how they negatively impact us all. According to the textbook *The Family: Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change*, the biggest issue impacting modern marriage is the impact that Western individualism has on social institutions and the ways that we relate to each other. The social value of marriage (the symbolic meaning that marriage has in society) decreases in a corresponding relationship with “the growth of individualism and the goals of individual fulfilment and self-expression” which “have weakened the ties of marriage” (Cohen, p. 275). “Culture increasingly becoming more individualistic decays American institutions and weakens our relational bonds” (p. 280) specifically because the more uncertainty people have in their lives, the more difficult it is to act according to our ideals and long-term goals. This has shifted the culture around marriage from a practical necessity to a symbolic achievement that holds less and less significance in Western society (p. 283). Economist Gary Becker’s 1973 theory of marriage as a marketplace applied rational choice and economic principles to intimate relationships, suggesting that individuals “trade” qualities like income, beauty, fertility, or social status in pursuit of the most advantageous match. This model reduces marriage to a cost-benefit exchange, reinforcing the idea that relationships are transactional and inherently self-centered. While it has influenced popular culture, media, and the self-help industry, where dating is often framed in terms of “value” and “return on investment,” many sociologists have criticized this framework for ignoring love, care, and the deeply social and emotional dimensions of partnership. By treating people as commodities, Becker’s model obscures how relationships are shaped by culture, attachment, and mutual growth, not just strategic

exchange. (p. 290-291). Emphasis on self-determination in the West has also caused a decline in endogamy, or marriage within distinct groups (p. 295). “Marriage as a lifelong commitment to another person seems like a paradoxical ideal in a modern era defined by individualism” (p. 302) and it leads to people pursuing relationships for selfish and self-motivated reasons. “Individualism and marriage don’t mix” (p. 302) because “individualism and individual autonomy are replacing strong couple commitments” (p. 315).

These statements were supported in the paper “The Marriage Movement” written by authors Avishai, Heath, and Randles, who offered an overview of marriage debates in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Risman, Chapter 20). They stated that “love, personal choice, and self-fulfillment compete with laws, religious sanctions, and economic constraints as the social glue of marriage and family” (Risman, p. 307) and described how scholars argue excessive individualism has undermined the institution of marriage, “in other words, these changes are reflective of pervasive moral failures.” The trend of Americans having the highest marriage and divorce rates of all Western industrialized countries “can be explained in large part by the simultaneous and often contradictory commitments of Americans to stable and secure lifelong marriage and to individual fulfillment and self-expression” that justifies ending relationships when they stop providing individuals with immediate gratification (p. 308). Clearly, America’s glorification and prioritization of the self is causing a massive cultural crisis where emotional avoidance has led an entire society to forget how to communicate and repair conflict, resulting in an egotistical culture unable to relate in healthy ways.

The trend of Americans having the highest marriage and divorce rates among Western industrialized nations reflects the tension between two contradictory cultural commitments: the ideal of stable, lifelong marriage and the equally strong prioritization of individual fulfillment and self-expression (p. 308). When relationships no longer provide immediate gratification, they are often abandoned rather than repaired. This tendency is compounded by America’s glorification of the self, which fosters emotional avoidance and undermines the skills needed for conflict resolution and repair, leading to a culture increasingly egotistical and unable to sustain healthy relational bonds.



The decline of religion in the West further amplifies this crisis. In previous generations, religious frameworks emphasized marriage as a sacred covenant, and vows were “honored” as a lifelong moral obligation rather than a conditional agreement. While these frameworks were often rigid and sometimes oppressive, they did provide cultural reinforcement for endurance and communal support structures for marital repair. As fewer people anchor their marriages in religious or spiritual

commitments, relationships are increasingly governed by secular values of individual choice, personal growth, and self-fulfillment. Without the external pressure of sacred vows, the cultural expectation of perseverance in the face of difficulty weakens, leaving couples more vulnerable to dissolution when challenges arise. The erosion of these binding narratives, combined with America's individualist ethos, helps explain why communication, repair, and endurance have given way to withdrawal, avoidance, and high rates of relational breakdown.

The consequences of Western hyper-individualism and the emphasis on service to self over service to others affects multiple dimensions across society. Psychologically, it leads to dissociation, loneliness, learned helplessness, internalized shame, and poor emotional regulation. Relationally, it leads to disconnection, transactional relationships, projection of unmet needs, and weaponizing boundaries or "ghosting" as culturally sanctioned forms of emotional avoidance and neglect. Culturally, it leads to competitive knowledge production and academic commodification, punitive parenting practices, and stigmatization of dependency and disability. Economically, it creates justification for exploitation and capitalism and the invisibilization of care labor (especially by women and neurodivergents). Individualism even affects our governance, resulting in policy systems that emphasize punitive control over relational repair and ignoring trauma informed justice.

I have advocated for numerous alternative frameworks to individualism. These include:

1. relational cognition, or the idea that selfhood arises within a relational field, not as a bounded ego;
2. trauma informed interdependence, in which emotional safety and regulation are co-created, not individually generated;
3. restorative cohesion, which is a social model I've developed where healing, governance, and learning are collective and reciprocal;
4. disability justice and neurodivergent inclusion, which challenge the ableist myth of an independent, rational individual.

The ultimate solution is to resocialize people to value interdependence, emotional literacy, loyalty, integrity and mutual commitment. A

healthy society is one where people are capable of sustaining emotionally secure, coregulated, and committed relationships, whether within marriage or other long-term structures. When the core problem of individualism is addressed, society would then shift toward a model of relational interdependence, where people are taught from childhood to coregulate emotions, resolve conflict, and understand commitment as a relational, not transactional, act. This shift would support all family structures, not just traditional marriages, while stabilizing communities and reducing social fragmentation.

Policy Recommendations:

A. Structural Policy: Trauma-Informed Relationship Education Initiative

Program: Implement Relational Education & Emotional Literacy (REEL) curriculum in all public schools (K–12).

Purpose: Teach children emotional regulation, conflict resolution, secure attachment, and collaborative decision-making.

Rationale: Research shows emotional dysregulation and poor relational skills predict relational, marital, mental and emotional instability. By intervening early, we prepare future generations for healthy partnerships and relationships.

B. Cultural Policy: National Relational Health Campaign

Program: Launch a federally supported campaign akin to past public health movements, with a motto such as “Strength in Unity”

Purpose: Destigmatize dependency, promote mutual aid and care, and counter the myth of the independent, self-contained adult.

Rationale: Cultural messaging shapes behavior. To rebuild a culture of commitment, we must make interdependence and emotional intelligence visible, aspirational, and supported.

C. Community Policy: T.I.M.E. – Trauma-Informed Mentorship Exchange

Overview: Fund and expand initiatives like T.I.M.E., a trauma informed nonprofit offering mentorship, emotional regulation coaching, and Polyvagal-based training for coregulation through safe relational modeling.

How It Works: T.I.M.E. connects trauma survivors with trained volunteers who model emotional regulation and secure attachment, restoring nervous system safety and relational trust.

Why It Matters: Emotional dysregulation rooted in childhood trauma (ACEs) is a major predictor of adult relational instability, addiction, and isolation. ACEs are caused by relational trauma. Without relational healing, no amount of legal or symbolic marriage reform will succeed.

I have created a mock website for T.I.M.E. - Trauma Informed Mentorship Exchange to show what this community policy concept might look like in action. <https://collectivehealingtime.wordpress.com/>

Policy Proposal: Relational Education & Emotional Literacy (REEL) Initiative

Title: REEL (Relational Education & Emotional Literacy)

A Trauma-Informed Policy for Social-Emotional Development and Relational Competence in K–12 Public Education

Executive Summary

The REEL Initiative proposes the integration of a trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate Relational Education & Emotional Literacy (REEL) curriculum across all K–12 public schools. The aim is to proactively equip students with the emotional, relational, and interpersonal skills necessary for healthy development, social belonging, and long-term mental well-being. A central component of the curriculum includes the Japanese Pillow Method, adapted as a child-centered tool to foster empathy, self-reflection, and emotional perspective-taking. Other components include:

Emotional Literacy Foundations → Teaching students to recognize, name, and regulate emotions through age-appropriate activities.

Attachment & Co-Regulation Practices → Exercises that help children build secure relationships with peers and adults through trust, safety, and attunement.

Conflict Resolution & Restorative Practices → Tools for navigating disagreements nonviolently, emphasizing repair and mutual understanding over punishment.

Trauma-Informed Classroom Strategies → Training teachers to identify signs of dysregulation and respond with supportive, non-punitive interventions.

Mindfulness & Nervous System Regulation → Breathwork, movement, and grounding activities designed to help students self-regulate and return to safety.

Perspective-Taking & Role-Play → Activities that encourage students to understand different viewpoints and strengthen empathy.

Relational Communication Skills → Practice in active listening, assertive expression, and collaborative dialogue.

Cultural & Social Inclusion → Lessons that highlight diversity, anti-bias practices, and cross-cultural empathy to foster belonging.

Digital & Media Literacy → Guidance on healthy communication in online spaces, addressing cyberbullying, ghosting, and relational boundaries.

Community & Family Engagement → Involving caregivers in relational education to reinforce skills beyond the classroom.

I. Purpose

To implement a standardized national curriculum that teaches:

- Emotional regulation and awareness
- Conflict resolution and de-escalation skills
- Attachment literacy and secure relationship modeling
- Communication, empathy, and collaborative decision-making
- Boundary setting, consent, and relational ethics

II. Rationale

Current educational models largely omit relational and emotional development, despite growing research in neuroscience, psychology, and social work that highlights:

- Emotional dysregulation as a key predictor of long-term psychological and relational dysfunction
- Early relational trauma as a risk factor for anxiety, depression, violence, and disconnection
- Secure attachment and emotional attunement as protective factors for resilience and academic success
- The lack of healthy relationship modeling contributing to cycles of abuse, toxic masculinity, and emotional avoidance

By embedding relational and emotional literacy into the school system, REEL acts as a preventative public health intervention that fosters emotional intelligence, community cohesion, and long-term well-being.

III. Foundational Practices

A. The Japanese Pillow Method (Perspective-Taking Tool)

The Japanese pillow method, also known as the "pillow method" is a communication and conflict resolution technique that encourages individuals to consider multiple perspectives on an issue. It involves exploring different viewpoints, including one's own, the opposing view, and even the possibility of both being right or wrong, or that the issue isn't as significant as initially perceived. Ultimately, it aims to foster empathy and understanding in relationships by promoting a more nuanced and balanced approach to disagreements.

Here's a breakdown of the key aspects:

1. The Core Concept: The method emphasizes that there are multiple ways to view a situation, and that by exploring these different perspectives, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of the conflict and potentially find common ground.

2. The "Pillow" Analogy: The name "pillow method" comes from the idea that an argument has "four sides" (or perspectives) like a pillow, plus the center where the truth might lie.

3. The Five Positions (or Sides):

Position 1: "I'm right, you're wrong":

This is the initial, often default, position where one person believes their view is correct and the other is mistaken.

Position 2: "You're right, I'm wrong":

This involves actively trying to understand the other person's perspective, even if it contradicts one's own.

Position 3: "We're both right, we're both wrong":

This acknowledges that there can be validity in both viewpoints, or that the issue itself is not as straightforward as initially assumed.

Position 4: "This issue isn't as important as it seems":

This encourages a shift in perspective to consider the relative importance of the disagreement and whether it warrants the emotional investment.

Position 5: "There is truth in all four perspectives":

This recognizes that the issue is complex and that there may be elements of truth in all the previously considered viewpoints.

4. How to Use the Pillow Method:

- Identify a specific disagreement: Choose a conflict you're currently experiencing.
- Explore each position: Spend time reflecting on each of the five positions, considering how they apply to the situation.
- Seek mutual understanding: The goal is not to "win" the argument, but to gain a better understanding of the other person's perspective and find a path toward resolution.

5. Benefits of the Pillow Method:

- Improved communication: Encourages active listening and empathy.
- Conflict resolution: Helps individuals see the nuances of a disagreement and find common ground.
- Increased understanding: Fosters empathy and a more balanced perspective.
- Stronger relationships: By promoting understanding and empathy, the pillow method can strengthen relationships by reducing conflict and fostering deeper connection.

In essence, the pillow method is a valuable tool for navigating disagreements by encouraging individuals to step outside their own perspective and consider the situation from multiple angles.

Instructional Strategy

Beginning in elementary school, students will be taught to take five sides in any given conflict. The pillow is a reflective metaphor for imagining another person's emotional experience. This method teaches:

- Empathy development by mentally shifting perspectives
- Conflict repair by understanding others' feelings
- Emotional processing by imagining how one's actions affect others

This method is developmentally accessible, trauma-informed, and deeply rooted in non-punitive, restorative education. It encourages emotional curiosity, reduces reactivity, and builds cognitive empathy through embodied imagination.

Why It Works (Theoretical Justification)

- Neuroscience: Activates mirror neuron systems and improves affective attunement
- Developmental Psychology: Supports formation of theory of mind and secure attachment models
- Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: Allows emotional processing without shame or punishment

- Cultural Intelligence: Draws from a collectivist, relational model of ethics and harmony (wa 和)

IV. Curriculum Components

The REEL curriculum will be tailored by grade level, with scaffolding in emotional and relational skill-building.

Elementary (K–5)

- Naming feelings and body signals
- Conflict mediation circles
- “Pillow method” storytelling and journaling
- Mindful breathing and co-regulation games

Middle School (6–8)

- Relationship mapping and repair tools
- Consent, boundaries, and emotional vocabulary expansion
- Peer-to-peer reflective dialogues using pillow prompts
- Identity, self-esteem, and inclusion practices

High School (9–12)

- Attachment styles and healthy relationship models
- Intimacy, communication, and trust exercises
- Narrative repair (rewriting conflict stories through empathy)
- Collaborative decision-making and nonviolent dialogue

V. Policy Implementation Plan

1.Phase 1: Pilot (Year 1)

- Select diverse school districts across urban, suburban, and rural areas
- Train educators and social workers in trauma-informed relational instruction
- Evaluate student outcomes in empathy, emotional regulation, and school climate

2.Phase 2: National Expansion (Years 2–4)

- Integrate REEL curriculum into national education standards
- Partner with state departments of education for regional adaptation
- Implement teacher certification tracks for Relational Literacy Instruction

3.Phase 3: Long-Term Monitoring and Evaluation (Year 5+)

- Ongoing assessment of relational health indicators, mental health referrals, and disciplinary outcomes
- Adjust curriculum based on research findings and student feedback
- Publish annual relational health equity reports

VI. Anticipated Benefits

- Reduced bullying, violence, and disciplinary referrals
- Improved mental health and school belonging
- Increased emotional vocabulary, communication, and empathy
- Improved long-term outcomes in relationships, parenting, and workforce integration
- Restorative approach to conflict and community accountability

VII. Budget Considerations: Cost Offset Strategies:

- Partner with local universities for research & evaluation
- Apply for funding via social-emotional learning (SEL) grants, Title I or IV funding
- Seek support from mental health nonprofits or restorative justice coalitions

VIII. Conclusion

The REEL Initiative transforms classrooms into ecosystems of relational learning. By embedding tools like the Japanese Pillow Method within a trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate curriculum, this policy addresses the root causes of emotional distress, disconnection, and violence. The Japanese Pillow Method is a reflective teaching practice that encourages children to build empathy by imagining themselves in another person's emotional world. By guiding children to reflect on how

their actions affect others, the Pillow Method nurtures cognitive empathy and emotional regulation in a developmentally appropriate, non-punitive way. It is a foundational tool in trauma-informed relational education, helping students repair conflicts, build secure social bonds, and internalize compassion as a social skill.

REEL is not just an educational reform, it is a cultural investment in emotionally intelligent, relationally literate future generations.

Creating Effective Interventions for Family and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Many of the difficulties in developing effective interventions for treating abusive behaviors are due to a lack of public understanding in regards to what abuse is and where it originates. The textbook *The Family: Diversity, Inequality and Social Change* (Cohen 2021) only briefly mention coercive violence, but doesn't go into depth in explaining what causes it. Coercive control is a pattern of behaviors that are used to dominate, isolate, and manipulate. It can include emotional abuse, gaslighting, surveillance, financial restriction, threats, and isolation. These behaviors may not leave physical marks but they deeply impact the victim's sense of self, safety and autonomy. Relationships may appear normal to outsiders but be governed by unspoken internal rules which, when violated, result in emotional outbursts or other negative consequences. To individuals being controlled within the relationship, it can feel like walking on eggshells while being manipulated by another person's moods and desires. In simple terms, one partner gives away their personal power, generally without their knowledge or consent, while the other partner exerts their power over them, sometimes intentionally and knowingly but more frequently through a culturally conditioned sense of entitlement (Bancroft 2003). "Power wielded within the family arena is used to oppress its members" (Cohen 2021:472).

A collective and cultural misunderstanding in regards to power dynamics (Cohen 2021:450) results in Western institutions and the public placing responsibility on individuals, which is what sociologist Michael Johnson did when creating his conceptual model for IPV (Johnson 2006, 2008; Cohen 2021:449). Johnson's framework attempts to put violence into a broader pattern within relationships by considering context. His model identifies several factors including: does the violence occur frequently, at random, or only in response to certain triggers; does it serve a specific purpose such as controlling a spouse's behavior, or is it more uncontrolled lashing out; does it only happen in self-defense? Earlier

researchers identified two common patterns, situational couple violence and coercive controlling violence. Johnson identified a third less common pattern in his research, known as violent resistance, or what is now referred to in the media as “reactive abuse.” While Johnson adds context to violence patterns, his model still tends to isolate behavior from larger systemic drivers like patriarchy and economic precarity. Power dynamics, power imbalances and coercion are all symptoms of exploitative and hierarchical capitalist systems, which often inflict pain and suffering intentionally through their institutions as a form of social control (Cohen 2021:464).

The Western criminal justice system attempts to address IPV through police Lethality Assessment Programs, civil court protection orders, court ordered treatment programs, and domestic violence courts (Cohen 2021:469). Private services offered include hotlines, shelters, support groups, counseling, community-based services and free or low-cost legal advice (Cohen 2021:471). The state’s intervention into the family arena through policing child welfare agencies and schools actually weakens social order (Cohen 2021:465). And all of these options are essentially attempts to put a band-aid on a bullet hole. Because abuse is never an individual issue, it is a systemic symptom, private agency and state interventions are frequently ineffective and a case of “too little, too late” due to failing to place responsibility on the system where it belongs. As traced by Eden (2021), the phrase ‘we must go upstream...’ is often used to describe root cause prevention. We need to go upriver to see why people are falling in if we truly wish to alleviate suffering.

The river starts where patriarchal systems endow men with a sense of entitlement, which Lundy Bancroft identifies as the core driver behind men's abusive behavior, rather than race, social class, emotional wounds, psychological disorders, or substance abuse. Male dominance in economic, political and familial realms enable them to continue committing violence against women, which is the main way that they maintain patriarchal control (Cohen 2021:465) along with sustaining an environment of rape culture and normalized systemic abuse. Bancroft (2003) describes abuse as rooted in ownership, growing into entitlement, and branching into control tactics. When crimes do occur, such as in religious institutions or the military (Cohen 2021:466), a “bro code” results in a “boys club” mentality where men usually cover up for other men.

Victims are silenced through coercion and generally acquiesce because obedience and people pleasing behaviors are socialized into our children through culturally accepted “power over” coercive parenting methods; “the desire to please family and authority figures, in addition to a strong sense of fear, makes (objecting) impossible” (Cohen 2021:467). The author of this paper has previously discussed this topic in the slideshow *What is Abuse, and How Can It Be Prevented?* (Snow 2024).

A matriarchy is a social system in which women hold the primary power and authority, while a patriarchy is a system in which men hold the primary power and authority. Prior to colonization, many indigenous tribes had matriarchal familial and socioeconomic structures. The first intervention that I would enact to eliminate IPV and family violence would be to institute equal political, economic and familial power in society, starting with creating a system that elevates the voices of wise women leaders. I would choose specifically to elevate BIPOC women, who have been disproportionately affected by both poverty and IPV (Cohen 2021:468).

When most people envision matriarchy they think of patriarchy in reverse, where women subjugate men, but it’s actually a world based on love and respect, the opposite of fear and oppression. Children are safe while the elders and vulnerable are taken care of. Our connection to nature and the Earth is respected. As Lizzy Sparkle Lumb (2025) put it, “It’s the architecture of love instead of dominion.”

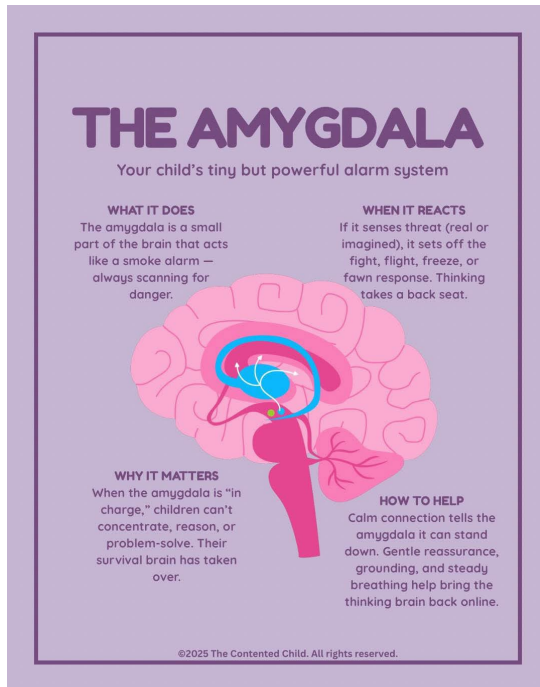
According to Oxfam (2022) and The New York Times (Wezerek 2020) women contribute roughly 11 trillion dollars’ worth of unpaid care work to the economy each year, well over the value of any corporation. Care work is the ‘hidden engine’ that keeps the wheels of our economies, businesses and societies turning. The river flows from entitlement to control, which is where the second most significant factor contributing to IPV can be found: poverty (Cohen 2021:451). Women are at much higher risk of being abused when they have a low socioeconomic status (Cohen 2021:451) because they lack the resources to leave and reestablish themselves. Women historically were expected to endure abuse for the sake of their families, and now they are expected to leave, without being given the means to do so (Cohen 2021:464). Poverty is a function of capitalism because capitalism depends on extracting labor for profit, and the system

creates poverty by failing to distribute wealth fairly, regulate economic policies, and provide safety nets for the vulnerable. Poverty is a form of structural violence and results in complex trauma for people whose nervous systems are stuck in survival mode and a chronic state of fight or flight due to dealing with chronically stressful conditions. The second intervention I would institute to eliminate IPV would be the creation and implementation of a Universal Basic Income, so that care work would come to be seen as equally valued labor, and so that women would be able to support themselves and their children, if necessary, without being forced to remain in abusive conditions or struggle in poverty alone (Edin and Kefalas 2019). Poverty is linked to a higher risk of insecure attachment in children, which can negatively impact their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Bremner 2006; Pa-C 2025).

Abuse, at its core, is typically a learned behavior that is rooted in environmental factors and nervous system dysregulation combined with a lack of emotional fluency, communication and coping skills. Through a trauma informed lens (CDC 2025) and without moralizing behaviors, judging, using binary cognition to place responsibility on individuals without considering systemic or environmental contexts, or projecting/assuming intent of another, what abuse really equates to on a biological level is stress and emotional flooding that dysregulates the nervous system to be the point of overwhelm. This, combined with culturally normalized patterns of control and hierarchical power over social dynamics results in violence and entitlement. When adults are kept permanently in a state of survival and live daily in a state of fight or flight, they are operating from the amygdala, which results in child like behaviors that include manipulation and control tactics, emotional outbursts, threats, meltdowns, shutdowns, and being unreasonable due to the immature brain being incapable of controlling the emotions and body. Children living in such environments are at greater risk for developing problems themselves including behavior and mental health issues (Cohen 2021:462-463). There is a significant overlap between attachment styles and family communication styles, which the author of this paper discusses in America's Hidden Health Crisis: Western Parenting Methods Impacts on Human Development and Behavior (Snow 2024). Families who lack resources and experience a high amount of stress typically don't have the skills to communicate effectively or manage their

emotions well, so their relationships suffer as a result. Insecure attachment, characterized by a lack of trust and a secure base in relationships, can stem from various challenges associated with poverty, such as parental stress, inconsistent caregiving, and limited access to resources (Camacho and Henderson 2022). After restoring women to positions of power in society and balancing care work more equally by implementing a UBI, the third intervention I would create is a public health awareness campaign for social and emotional learning (SEL) and mandatory programs for both adults and K-12 students to teach them communication, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills.

In conclusion, these three proposed interventions (matriarchal leadership, Universal Basic Income, and social/emotional education) with a focus on emotional regulation and public health reframes IPV from criminal justice to actionable prevention. These three interventions are interconnected and reflect macro-micro systems theory, emotional development, neurology, human development, and structural inequality.



The Sacred Divergence, or How Autism is Guiding Humanity Back to its Forgotten Ways: Neurodiversity, Morphic Fields, and the Re-Indigenization of Human Consciousness

About 70,000 years ago, humanity experienced a Cognitive Revolution with the invention of language, imagination and shared myths. 10,000 years ago, the Agricultural Revolution showed the emergence of hierarchy, ownership and linear time. Most scholars agree that the earliest forms of writing occurred about 5,500 years ago. The Scientific and Industrial Revolutions about 500 years ago ushered humanity into an era of extraction, control, and individualism. Aligning with both evolutionary theory and cultural history, my vision of autistic individuals as evolutionary guides places them not only as survivors as a disembodied world, but as the architects of the next one. We are now entering into a Reintegrative Revolution and a return to pre-verbal, relational connection and intuitive communication; this evolution is being guided by the very people that humanity's social systems are currently excluding.

Prior to written language, humans transmitted knowledge orally. This meant that human societies were more relational in nature and required direct, personal, and empathetic connection. Communicating ideas through the use of mnemonic oral narratives ensured social cohesion in early society by decentralizing knowledge, replacing gatekeeping with community storytelling and a network of wise and respected elders. The written word eroded collective memories, which placed a stronger emphasis on individual knowledge accumulation, reinforcing social hierarchies. This has led to the use of literacy as a gatekeeping tool, and access to knowledge being controlled as a means to gain and maintain social dominance.

When societies relied on oral communication, a deeper reliance on direct eye contact, vocal tone, body language and gestures resulted in deeper relational coregulation, meaning that all emotions; sadness, anger, joy, grief and mourning, ect.; were all processed on a collective level through storytelling or songs. Conflict resolution would be found through group council or mediated in ritual and was immediate. Listening was considered an essential survival skill, meaning people had a deeper understanding of themselves and the impact of their behaviors on those around them. People saw themselves relationally and were identified as such, hence early human surnames that indicate “son of” or some type of tribal belonging or kinsmanship. Everyone had a clearly defined role and was seen as contributing to the group, adding value to the whole in some way; social roles were functional and relational, which led to deeper group identity, loyalty and unity. This cohesion was lost when the written word created artificial (human and not nature imposed) social hierarchical structures.

Communication would have been richer and more deeply attuned, full of context and deeply intuitive. Time would have been perceived as cyclical, not linear, prior to the written word, and would have been deeply tied to the earth, human body, seasons, agriculture, hunting, plant and animal life that early human life was dependent on. There would have been no anonymity in a social structure like this, which means that something like what we might call “group telepathy” or a shared consciousness deeply rooted in relational attunement and nervous system coregulation almost certainly existed at that point in history. The use of shared rituals such as dancing, drumming, or chanting trained entire communities to wire their nervous systems together, syncing their brain waves in an embodied sense of “we” that transcended thought. Without written language, humans would have relied on tapping into Earth’s morphic field to instantly read each other’s emotional states, like a flock of birds shifting in unison; this is how coregulation and limbic resonance work. In such a context, survival depended not on abstract symbols but on the immediate, embodied exchange of feeling and intention. Communities would have cultivated a deep attunement to one another’s nervous systems, where safety, belonging, and cooperation were communicated through presence and resonance rather than words. When identity is distributed “I am my people,” “I am my land,” ego is minimized and this

porous boundary between self and other results in communication being felt more than spoken.

This kind of nonverbal, embodied empathy results in a form of mind reading that may not be telepathy in a supernatural sense but rather a form of manifest collective consciousness. The Telepathy Tapes podcast created by Ky Dickens extends this idea by exploring how non speaking autistic individuals may be tapping into this higher attunement through an increased sensitivity to their environment, social cues, and relational presence that results in a felt-sense form of communication, or type of group consciousness. This mirrors the preverbal, embodied relational intelligence that our ancestors relied on. But in the case of The Telepathy Tapes, the phenomenon seems to function outside of direct proximity or any other obvious clues. This may not actually defy conventional scientific understanding. Dr. Diane Hennacy Powell, a neuroscientist and psychiatrist formerly affiliated with John Hopkins and Harvard, has run telepathy tests on non-verbal autistic children who were able to accurately answer questions without receiving cues, suggesting they were picking up on thoughts directly and indicating existence of a non-localized form of shared intelligence amongst all humans. This challenges our assumptions and definitions of intelligence and is evidence for our fields of understanding human communication being too narrow and restrictive.

The authors of “Cultures as Causative of Mental Disorder” drew a correlation between the Western view of “childlike” behavior and its view of primitives (Leighton and Hughes, 2005, p. 5), which relates to the social intelligence hypothesis and our ideas of social and cognitive complexity equating higher social value and status within Western culture. Rather than viewing autistic individuals as socially impaired, a study on “Autistic Sociality” by Elinor Ochs & Olga Solomon suggests that autistic sociality is a valid, context-dependent and distinct form of social coordination that challenges the traditional assumption that autism is simply a deficit in social engagement. The article “Mental Health is biological health: Why tackling “diseases of the mind” is an imperative for biological anthropology in the 21st century” mentioned evolutionary biology and theory directly in regards to autism; the authors used references to academic sources that supported their ideas on the adverse effects of social control on behavior. “Research on diverse populations should incorporate an evolutionary concept of cognitive and emotional

function, and consider a broader array of phenotypic markers and causal models. This would better identify genuine cognitive and emotional dysfunction” (Syme & Hagen, 2019, p. 108). They proposed a provisional classification of mental distress into four broad evolutionary categories and mentioned autism in a way that implied an evolutionary mismatch to social selection pressures. This paper indicated that research and social policies on mental health disorders should shift understandings from a biological emphasis to prioritizing a relational approach that is focused on mitigating adversity and resolving conflict.

The biologist Rupert Sheldrake theorized about morphic resonance, the idea that living systems are connected by non-local fields of memory and behavior. This morphic resonance is responsible for flocks of birds changing direction in synchronicity, appearing as a single mind responding as one. This is strikingly similar to what The Telepathy Tapes portrays, non-speaking autistic children responding in real time to thoughts, emotions, and questions as if they are tapping into a bio-energetic field of social awareness that neurotypicals may have lost or are filtering out due to the written language creating structuring cognitive hierarchies of thought through linguistic dominance. What if autistic individuals are not disabled, but additionally abled, and the ways that our society narrows its definitions of intelligence and communication is also limiting society’s ability to recognize and appreciate this evolving skill? Perhaps autistic children are reminding us what it means to be human through their super powered ability to tap into a morphic field that is transmitting patterns of behavior, using limbic resonance in their bodies to tap into our shared memories of what it means to be human that lie in a liminal space, just beyond speech and the written word.

Biology has a term called atavism that refers to the reappearance of a genetic trait or ability that has disappeared generations before. According to neuroscience, environmental triggers can switch previously silenced genes back on, especially in response to trauma. An example of atavism through environmental triggers can be seen in the study of stress responses across generations. For instance, children and grandchildren of people who experienced extreme trauma, such as famine or war, sometimes show heightened stress reactivity even though they never endured those conditions themselves. Neuroscience explains this through epigenetics, where trauma in one generation alters how certain genes are

expressed, often silencing or activating them, and those changes can be passed on. A well-documented case is the Dutch Hunger Winter of 1944–45: children born to mothers who were pregnant during the famine, and even their grandchildren, showed higher risks of obesity, diabetes, and stress-related disorders because genes related to metabolism and stress regulation were switched on or off by the traumatic environment. This illustrates how trauma can reawaken ancient survival traits, like storing fat more efficiently, or heightened vigilance that once protected ancestors but can become maladaptive in modern contexts.

I believe that a latent ability is currently resurfacing that allows humans to access a non-local field of morphic resonance. Anthropology refers to this phenomenon of a culture or species rediscovering ancient or suppressed wisdom or ways of knowing as collective reclamation, or re-indigenization. These terms all describe the emergent neurodivergent consciousness reawakening that is revolutionizing human consciousness by awakening our dormant capabilities necessary for pre-verbal, relational survival. The autistic trait operating outside of hierarchical norms and relational expectations mirror the relational intelligence of pre-colonial land based indigenous societies. One might argue that the evolutionary purpose for autism in humanity's historical timeline is to re-indigenize society by helping to remind them of their forgotten ways, and to lead the rest of humanity in a cultural reclamation. Instead of a deficit, neurodivergence can be seen through a lens of offering humanity an evolutionary counterbalance to the disembodiment forced on us through artificial systems of control. Not behind, and not ahead, autistic people are outside of the colonized matrix, holding open a door that neurotypicals forgot was even there.

If autistic individuals carry the evolutionary role of reminding humanity of forgotten relational, embodied, and land-based ways of being, the paradox is that neurotypical society often silences the very voices it most needs to hear. Marginalization, pathologization, and exclusion of autistic people create barriers to their role as cultural mirrors and teachers. Yet reminders can still emerge, sometimes indirectly. Even when rejected, autistic resistance to conformity exposes the brittleness of artificial systems of control where masking, burnout, and social withdrawal reveal the costs of living in disembodied, extractive cultures. Autistic truth-telling, pattern recognition, and refusal to accept shallow social

scripts serve as constant disruptions that force neurotypical society to confront its own avoidance of depth and authenticity. In this way, autistic people “remind” by their very existence, whether or not they are granted platforms of respect. The challenge, then, is for society to recognize that what it marginalizes as disorder may in fact be its evolutionary guidepost back toward relationality, reciprocity, and wholeness.

In a *Brief History of Mankind*, Yuval Noah Harari explored themes regarding the idea of forgotten human capacities, and the ways that modern society may have traded their ancient ways of knowing for social hierarchy and control. He argued that the rise of symbolic thought distanced us from intuitive and sensory forms of perception. Carl Sagan, along with Ann Druyan, touched on ideas that deeply aligned with this in their book *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors: A Search for Who We Are*. Exploring the evolutionary memory of humanity, and how our behaviors, instincts and social systems are deeply rooted in ancient patterns that modern society has forgotten or intentionally obscured. Their work traced every human behavior, from war to love, back to the beginning of time, and correlated these patterns of emergent behavior with the evolution of language and self-awareness. The entire premise of their book is that societal progress has resulted in a form of collective amnesia, and that science and technology have cut us off from our animal instincts, emotional intelligence, and our shared deep kinship with the Earth and each other.

Without the media, books, text messages, or the written word of any kind, life would be a lot more telepathic, neurodivergent, and indigenous. Autistics are guiding Western society back to valuing more natural ways of relating, and to more rhythmic, cyclical and embodied ways of life. Humanity’s neurodivergent forms of cognition and socializing offer their species a counter-evolutionary force to balance post-agricultural civilization, moving away from individual ideologies and back towards a shared and cohesive cultural narrative. This narrative or collective mythology is not one that needs reinventing but is one that non-verbal members of our species have been rediscovering, which *The Telepathy Tapes* is one example of, and this collective memory connects us to our origins as a species and our original ways of being, knowing, living and relating with one another.

For neurotypical society to learn from neurodivergent ways of being, the first step is to decenter deficit models and approach neurodivergence with humility rather than pathology. This means recognizing that autistic and other ND forms of cognition are not broken versions of the norm but carry intact, valuable ways of perceiving, relating, and remembering that humanity as a whole has forgotten. From there, neurotypicals would need to practice attunement and deep listening; slowing down, tolerating silence, and being willing to meet ND people on their terms rather than forcing conformity to scripted norms. Another step is cultivating embodied relational practices that ND people often model naturally: stimming as self-regulation, pattern-seeking as a way of connecting to systems and cycles, and non-verbal attunement as a form of communication. Rather than dismissing these as symptoms, neurotypicals can use them as guides to re-engage their own dormant capacities for rhythm, resonance, and presence. Finally, they would need to prioritize collective well-being over individual productivity, relearning relational repair, co-regulation, and reciprocity from those who already resist the isolating pressures of post-agricultural, industrialized culture. In doing so, neurotypicals are not “adopting autistic behaviors” but reclaiming their own ancestral inheritance, an inheritance neurodivergent individual has preserved in their ways of being.

A return to pre-verbal, relational intelligence would end the myth that articulation is synonymous with intelligence and shatters the idea of individual value being tied directly to abilities to produce, conform, or be exploited. This will create an era where sensitivity is seen as strength and where connection becomes the root of knowledge again, an age where human divergence from dominance and maladaptation restores them to their original evolutionary timeline and returns them to social cohesion and balance as a civilization. This era, what may come to be known as the Reintegrative Revolution, is about pulling back the veil obscuring these hidden truths and waking up from our collective amnesia to remember what was never truly lost. Guided by those living outside the confines of conformity, hierarchy, and artificial constructs, humanity is being offered a path back to relational wholeness. In the silence of non-speaking autistic individuals, we can hear the echo of our origins, and the call of our collective future.

Giving Grace: Non-Duality and the Paradox of Tolerance

"Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive." -The Dalai Lama

Karl Popper's Paradox of Tolerance warned that unlimited tolerance could lead to the downfall of tolerant societies if intolerance is not actively suppressed. While tolerance is often framed as an absolute virtue, Popper argued that if a society extends unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, it risks being destroyed from within. Intolerant groups, once protected by the society's openness, can exploit that freedom to spread hate, suppress dissent, and ultimately dismantle the very conditions that allowed them to exist. In other words, if intolerance is tolerated without resistance, the intolerant may eventually seize power and abolish tolerance altogether. Popper's insight highlights a fundamental tension: a free society must, at times, defend itself by refusing tolerance to those who advocate for the destruction of others' rights and dignity. This does not necessarily mean suppressing unpopular opinions, but it does mean setting boundaries where speech or actions incite violence, dehumanization, or systemic exclusion. The paradox underscores that tolerance is not passive acceptance of everything, but an active commitment to protect the conditions of pluralism, diversity, and mutual respect. Without drawing these lines, tolerance can become self-defeating, enabling the rise of authoritarianism, extremism, or social collapse.

But this formulation, grounded in adversarial and binary moral logic, creates an ethical contradiction: to preserve tolerance, one must engage in its negation. My non-dual framework shows that the paradox is not a universal truth, but a byproduct of binary cognition and trauma-disconnected social design. Drawing on Mirror Integration Theory, Functional Conflict Perspective, and trauma-informed governance, I propose a systemic reframing: intolerance is not an enemy to be eradicated, but a relational signal of unintegrated trauma and disconnection. In a society designed around relational attunement rather than moral retribution,

intolerance is metabolized through restorative boundaries, emotional co-regulation, and collective nervous system stabilization.

This framework dissolves the binary of tolerance vs. intolerance by redefining justice, freedom, and safety as emergent properties of relational coherence, not ideological purity. In doing so, it offers a post-liberal ethic rooted in resonance, not repression, and a model of society where difference is not “tolerated” but interactively held, causing the threat of intolerance to dissolve with the conditions that created it.

Popper asserts that to maintain tolerance, one must become intolerant of the intolerant. This logic, however, traps society in a moral contradiction and perpetuates the very control it seeks to resist. Rather than tolerating or suppressing intolerance, my model addresses intolerance as a symptom of trauma, disconnection, and systemic dysregulation. Justice, in this framework, is not punitive but restorative. Tolerance is not conditional acceptance but nervous system-level integration. By shifting from binary logic to systemic feedback and relational regulation, this paper reimagines societal cohesion as a process of resonance, accountability, and healing, rendering the paradox of tolerance obsolete. The paradox of tolerance becomes a central ethical bind in liberal democracies, which struggle to uphold pluralism while defending themselves from extremism. But this binary (tolerate or suppress) is not the only lens we can use. It’s rooted in adversarial, Cartesian logic that sees conflict as a threat rather than a feedback signal. I believe we can challenge the foundations of Popper’s paradox by introducing a trauma-informed framework that sees intolerance not as a moral failing to be punished, but as a relational rupture to be healed.

Popper’s paradox rests on several assumptions:

1. That tolerance and intolerance are opposing forces
2. That tolerance is a passive stance requiring defense through exclusion
3. That moral neutrality is possible and desirable

But liberal democracies often use the appearance of neutrality to uphold dominant norms. In practice, so-called neutrality becomes a defense of the status quo. Spaces that claim moral neutrality often exclude marginalized voices while protecting dominant ideologies. Popper’s logic

continues this pattern by allowing dominant groups to define what counts as “intolerance.” And real freedom doesn’t come from the absence of constraint, it comes from the presence of relational and structural conditions that support nervous system regulation, autonomy, and mutual care. Moral neutrality isn’t freedom; it’s avoidance of responsibility and oppressive complicity. A clear example is how many liberal democracies frame free speech laws as neutral, universal protections, yet in practice these laws often uphold dominant norms. Hate speech directed at marginalized groups is frequently defended as “free expression,” while the voices of those same marginalized communities are policed or dismissed when they challenge systemic injustice. For instance, racial slurs or demeaning rhetoric may be tolerated under the banner of neutrality, but protest movements like Black Lives Matter have faced surveillance, suppression, and delegitimization. The supposed neutrality of “everyone has the same right to speak” ignores how power imbalances shape whose voices carry weight and whose speech is treated as threatening. In this way, the liberal democratic ideal of neutrality ends up reinforcing the dominance of majority groups, masking systemic inequality beneath the language of fairness.

From a trauma-informed lens, intolerance is symptomatic of unresolved trauma, relational wounds, and nervous system dysregulation. The urge to control, dominate, or exclude others is often a survival adaptation to perceived threat. Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) and the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) suggest that societal dysfunction mirrors internal emotional fragmentation. Intolerant ideologies form when people are denied the safety, connection, and belonging they need to metabolize fear and difference. Instead of punishing intolerance or allowing it to fester, a trauma-informed society would learn to regulate it, holding firm boundaries while creating the conditions for integration and healing.

In trauma-aware systems, safety isn’t maintained through exclusion, it’s created through co-regulation. Boundaries are held not through force, but through relational repair and restorative accountability. That doesn’t mean letting harm slide. It means facing it directly without replicating it. Accountability becomes a restoration of resonance, not punishment, but the reintegration of what was fragmented. Justice becomes restorative instead of punitive. When we meet the intolerant not with suppression

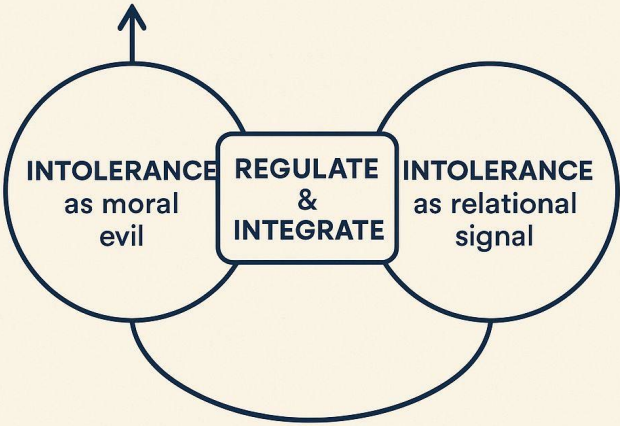
but with containment, reflection, and opportunities for repair, we reduce the appeal of extremism and interrupt the cycle of trauma-driven backlash that authoritarian systems often provoke.

Ultimately, we can move beyond the concept of “tolerance” altogether. Tolerance implies hierarchy and that those in power grant permission to those who are different. In a trauma-informed, non-dual society, there’s no permission structure for belonging. Difference isn’t an aberration; it’s part of the design. Safety doesn’t come from policing people; it comes from co-creating the conditions where everyone is invested in coherence. When our collective nervous system is regulated, the impulse toward domination loses its grip.

The paradox of tolerance isn’t a timeless truth; it’s the artifact of a fragmented system. It grows out of binaries that divide, fear that isolates, and governance that represses. But we can move differently. By shifting from adversarial logic to relational feedback, from punishment to repair, and from fear to coherence, we dissolve the paradox by changing the field in which the dilemma arises. We don’t have to pick between tolerance and intolerance; we can build the relational conditions that make that false binary irrelevant. This is the work of trauma-informed society: not perfect agreement, but integrated difference. Not moral purity, but resonance. Not exclusion, but repair. And that’s how we build something that lasts, though power being redefined.

Unconditional love = unconditional tolerance + unconditional belonging.

RESOLVING THE PARADOX OF TOLERANCE



The Paradox of Tolerance's Creation through Colonial Language and Relational Severance

Karl Popper's Paradox of Tolerance argues that "unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance" (Popper, 1945/2013, p. 581). While presented as a universal law, this logic is grounded in colonial categories of time and language that divide reality into binaries and impose conditional belonging. In fact, before colonial interruptions, humanity once shared a baseline Indigenous language that was relational, cyclical, and non-linear (Whorf, 1956; Boroditsky & Gaby, 2010; ABC News, 2017). In this worldview, there was no fragile beginning of tolerance to defend, no opposition between tolerance and intolerance, only continuous belonging where grace flowed automatically. The paradox of tolerance, then, emerges not from timeless truth but from the severance of this relational baseline.

From Relational Baseline to Disruption

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that language structures perception (Whorf, 1956). In early human societies, relational and cyclical language-oriented people toward timeless continuity. But this continuity was interrupted when outsiders arrived, imposed new categories of thought, and then vanished. Willerslev captures the strangeness of this event:

"It's a really weird scenario. A few immigrants appear in different villages and communities around Australia. They change the way people speak and think; then they disappear, like ghosts. And people just carry on living in isolation the same way they always have. This may have happened for religious or cultural reasons that we can only speculate about. But in genetic terms, we have never seen anything like it before" (Willerslev, cited in ABC News, 2017, para. 12).

This "ghost contact" shows how relational worldviews were disrupted. Even after the outsiders disappeared, the interruption remained:

language and thought had been fractured, creating openings for linear categories and adversarial logic.

Colonial Time and the Paradox of Tolerance

Popper's paradox is intelligible only within this fractured worldview. Once time is conceptualized as linear, tolerance becomes a contract with a beginning and an end, vulnerable to collapse. The paradox arises as a colonial solution: to defend a bounded system of belonging by excluding those deemed intolerant. But in the baseline relational worldview, there was no paradox. Difference was metabolized through continuous relation, not through binary defense. Belonging was inherent, not conditional.

Decolonizing as Return to Timelessness

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) describes decolonizing the mind as rejecting "false universalism in the guise of Westernized canons" (p. 16). To decolonize tolerance is to dissolve the colonial time-logic that produces paradoxes in the first place. It is to return to relational temporality, where grace is not a moral calculation but the emergent property of timeless coherence.

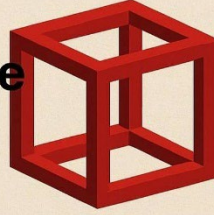
Conclusion

The paradox of tolerance is not an eternal truth but an artifact of relational severance. The Willerslev "ghost migration" reveals how outsiders interrupted relational worldviews by altering language and thought, leaving behind fractures that enabled colonial time and binary categories. To decolonize is to repair that rupture, returning to the shared baseline where language is relational, time is cyclical, and grace flows automatically.

Grace = the relational ground that was fractured by colonial interruptions of time through foreign language and cultural influences.

Debunking the Paradox of Tolerance

- Karl Popper's "Paradox of Tolerance" is rooted in colonialist, adversarial, and binary logic
- Rather than defending pluralism, it encourages exclusion and punishment
- Intolerance is not a "threat," but a relational signal of disconnection, dysregulation, and trauma
- Decoloniality challenges this paradox and affirms safety and belonging through relational attunement

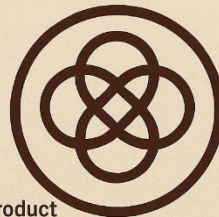


- Decolonizing the mind reveals that tolerance-as-contract is a false universalism.
- Many Indigenous traditions understand life and story as circles and relationships, not beginnings and endings.
- From a trauma-informed lens, intolerance is not a moral failing but a signal of unintegrated relational wounds.
- Healing and justice come not from punishment or exclusion, but from restorative boundaries, co-regulation, and relational repair.

GIVING GRACE DECOLONIZING THE PARADOX OF TOLERANCE

Popper's paradox says: to preserve tolerance, we must be intolerant of the intolerant.

But this "paradox" is not universal – it's the product of Western, colonial binaries that see conflict only as threat.



Short Summary, Giving Grace: Decolonizing the Paradox of Tolerance

Karl Popper warned that “unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance” (Popper, 1945/2013). But this so-called paradox is not universal truth, it is a product of Western, colonial binaries that divide the world into opposites: tolerant vs. intolerant, civilized vs. uncivilized.

Language Shapes Thought

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis shows that language structures shape how we perceive reality (Whorf, 1956). Western languages encode linear time and adversarial categories, while Indigenous languages reflect cyclical, relational understandings of time and story (Boroditsky & Gaby, 2010). In those worldviews, life does not “begin” and “end,” it moves continuously in circles and relationships.

Decolonizing Time

Decolonizing the mind means rejecting false universalism (Thiong’o, 1986) and returning to cyclical temporality. In this timeless state, difference is not “tolerated” as an exception, but inherently belongs. Grace flows automatically because belonging is the baseline of reality.

Trauma-Informed Belonging

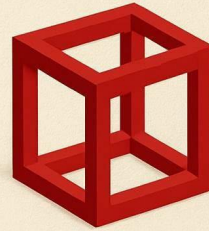
From a trauma informed lens, intolerance is not a threat to suppress but a signal of unintegrated wounds. Justice and safety do not come from exclusion but from restorative boundaries, co-regulation, and repair (Snow, 2025).

Conclusion

Popper’s paradox dissolves when we step outside colonial language and linear time. Decolonizing means returning to timelessness, where tolerance is no longer conditional and grace is not conditional or granted, it is lived and universally embodied.

Grace = timeless belonging.

Karl Popper's Paradox of Tolerance warns that unlimited tolerance could lead to the downfall of tolerant societies if intolerance is not actively suppressed.



But this formulation, grounded in adversarial and binary moral logic, is debunked by non-dual and decolonial theory.

Intolerance is not an enemy to be eradicated, but a relational signal of unintegrated trauma and disconnection.

Justice, freedom, and safety are not conditions to be imposed from above, but emergent properties of relational coherence

Cultural Salience and Mental Health: A Free listing Analysis of University Students' Perspectives on Emotions, Illness, and Healing

Introduction:

Mental health is not a universal experience but a culturally constructed concept, which means that different societies define, categorize, and respond to mental health issues in very separate and distinct ways that are shaped by historical, social, and epistemological frameworks. In this class, we have compared common mental illnesses in the United States to how they are treated in other cultures around the world, examining the differences between multiple treatment modalities, cultural beliefs, stigmas, taboos, and contrasted pharmaceuticals with non-traditional holistic interventions. Stepping outside of our box of Western cultural constructs allows us to interpret mental illness and health in a variety of newer ways using a broader spectrum of information gained from different social and cultural settings. This allows for a more accurate and multifaceted view of human suffering. By cross referencing mental illness symptoms across diverse cultures and between several fields of study, researchers can identify equivalencies in the ways that trauma manifests between various cultures. These alliances between methods and approaches then result in more effective treatments.

A key aspect of understanding cultural differences in mental health is through analyzing cultural salience, the ways that different societies and cultures understand mental health concepts, such as the terms and categories that are used for it. In the context of this assignment, cultural salience refers to the prominence or significance of certain ideas, concepts, or terms within a specific culture or social group. Free listing is a qualitative and quantitative research method that is used to identify culturally significant concepts. This comparative analysis of free list data concentrates mostly on making comparisons between individuals rather than the entire group list. List lengths are used here to infer the extent of

knowledge in a specific domain, and the frequency and order of terms are analyzed to infer importance. A semantic domain is “an organized set of words, concepts, or sentences, all at the same level of contrast, that jointly refer to a single conceptual sphere.” (Weller and Romney 1988:9; Thompson and Juan 2006:399) Qualitative analysis was used to look at the semantic domain’s thematic coding, and quantitative measures were used to evaluate the domain’s word frequencies and salience scores. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how our cultural influences can shape the way that we understand and interact with mental health issues.

Methodology:

Marsha Quinlan’s article offers guidance on how to use free listing as a research method, the core technique used here. Thompson, who graduated from WSU, together with Juan at the National University of Singapore also outlined methods using free list data for testing comparative cultural salience of items within a semantic domain between groups of respondents (Thompson and Juan 2006; 398). Weller and Romney provided directions in their book for students and researchers using a variety of formats to collect data from interviews and questionnaires in the social sciences research field.

Data for this study was collected from four volunteering student research participants. This free list task asked study participants to list as many words or concepts that came to mind when prompted with four domains. The domains given were: emotions, mental illness categories, symptoms of mental illness, and treatment approaches. Responses were then analyzed for patterns or reoccurring themes between terms recorded by the study participants. By examining responses from this small pool of data, this research project seeks to uncover which mental health related terms are most prominent within this student population, and also attempts to understand how these findings may reflect on broader cultural perceptions of mental health in Western culture. This study examined the inside perspectives of how mental health is understood and navigated by students and also provides an outside analytical framework to view their experiences from. After randomly selecting four students on campus, the research participants were asked to list on paper any words

that first came to mind to them when prompted with four predetermined domains regarding mental and emotional health and well-being.

Data, Participant 1:

Emotions: feelings, happy, sad, anxious, content, annoyed, frustrated, upset, refreshed, peaceful, invigorated.

Mental Illness Categories: depression, anxiety, chemical imbalances, bipolar, schizophrenic, OCD

Symptoms of Mental Illness: sad, uninterested, worried, tired, not hungry, unsure of reality ("is this just in my head"), unmotivated, sleepy, grouchy, lethargic, scattered, missing memories

Treatment Approaches: therapy, medicine, communication with loved ones, make plans with friends

Data, Participant Two:

Emotions: Happy, Sad, Mad, Angry, Depressed, Upset

Mental Illness Categories: Anxiety, Mood, Psychotic, Personality, Trauma

Symptoms of Mental Illness: Mood changes, eating habits, Sleep problems, Confused, Headaches

Treatment Approaches: Therapy, Medication, Support groups, Peer support

Data, Participant 3:

Emotions: feelings, sadness, happiness, anger, fear, excitement, melancholy, crying, emotional, intelligence, regret, disappointment, overwhelming, crucial, stigma

Mental Illness Categories: personality disorders, depressive disorders, manic disorders, addiction disorders, neurodegenerative, chronic, mild; severe, developmental disorders

Symptoms: hopelessness, helplessness, low self-esteem, low self-worth, low pleasure, sadness, despair, fatigue, brain fog, overbearing anxiety

Treatment Approaches: CBT, medications, electroconvulsive therapy, transcranial magnetic stimulation, therapy, mindfulness, journaling, Lobotomy (do not)

Data, Participant 4:

Emotions: happy, sad, anger, frustration, confusion, joy, annoyance, the mind, chemicals

Mental Illness Categories: I'm not very educated about this (was not comfortable elaborating on this response)

Symptoms of Mental Illness: overly happy, overly spacey, not making eye contact, bad at social cues, unable to handle loud noises, gets overstimulated easily, sudden withdrawal

Treatment Approaches: therapy, prescription, accommodations, support from loved ones, psychiatrist visit, clinic stays, environment support

When evaluating the four separate domains, each domain was grouped before analysis into four subcategories. Emotions were evaluated by examining the words that were associated with basic emotions, abstract emotions, negative emotional states, and positive emotional states. Mental Illness Categories focused on specific named disorders, broad categories, biomedical framing, and neurodivergent inclusion (other non-medicalized perspectives acknowledged). Symptoms of Mental Illness reviewed participant's use of words relating to internalized emotions, cognitive/behavioral issues, social problems, and issues correctly perceiving the self. Treatment Approaches looked at standard (typical) Western medical treatments, specialized interventions, spiritual healing or other more traditional methods, and relational/environmental/adaptive supports.

Across all domains, there was a noticeable absence of spiritual or indigenous approaches to mental health, which shows bias towards the Western biomedical model and its dominance in the WSU cultural group being studied. Significantly, there was no mention of spiritual, cultural

or indigenous healing methods from any of the four participants. Participants 1 and 2 showed the strongest inclination towards Western practices, with a focus on clinical dimensions. Participant 3 demonstrated the highest level of cultural competency and awareness of clinical definitions and dimensions. Participant 4 displayed an understanding of behavioralist in their responses for symptomatology and treatment modalities.

Participant 1's free list included both positive and negative emotions with a slight inclination towards more negativity. Anxiety appeared in both emotions and mental illness categories. A mention of chemical imbalances suggests a medicalized understanding of mental illness. Depression and anxiety, the most prevalent conditions in Western culture, appear first in the mental illness category. Schizophrenia appearing as the word "schizophrenic" may possibly indicate a view of mental illness reflecting the deficit model which is used to treat mental illness in the Western world. The cognitive symptoms that were listed under the mental illness category shows this participant has an awareness of mental disorders and their symptoms. The symptoms listed suggest an understanding of mental illness as both a physical and emotional struggle, and including self-doubt in regards to reality may reflect on a lack of cultural validation regarding mental health experiences. Alternative and holistic treatments were less culturally salient to this participant.

Participant 2's free list focused on basic emotional states and did not include any positive emotions beyond happiness. Including Depression as a feeling and a disorder was similar to Participant 1's understanding of Anxiety as both and these results align with the Western world's view of emotional disturbances being recurring problematic issues that do not resolve themselves. Participant 2 categorized mental illness into broad diagnostic groups instead of Participant 1's list of specific disorders. Their symptom list for mental illness was also broader and focused on behavioral changes as opposed to emotional ones. Awareness of psychosomatic connections, community-based interventions such as support groups and peer supports were listed, but overall, Participant 2's views on treatment reflect a structured and clinical understanding of mental illness that also parallels standard Western treatments.

Participant 3 uses a rich emotional vocabulary that refers to both basic and more nuanced feelings. Their broad mental illness categories

use diagnostic concepts across both psychology and neurology. The word “crucial” they included on the emotions list indicated that the priority this person places on their emotional fluency and literacy. Across all domains somatic terms were also used, which indicates a knowledge of how the body and the mind integrate to manifest distress. The use of the word “low” on three separate occasions could indicate a value judgment or bias.

Participant 4 indicated that they lacked cultural competency or access to information in regards to the mental health category, and their reluctance to go into further detail might indicate some discomfort the participant has in regards to this topic. Their discomfort exemplifies an emic perspective, where certain categories lack shared language. The emotional words that they chose included common terms such as happy, sad, and angry, but they also included chemicals and the mind as emotions, which is interesting because it blurs a boundary between feeling and thought. The symptoms that they listed might suggest a familiarity with neurodivergency or autism spectrum disorder. They emphasized accommodations and support from loved ones, which shows a knowledge of how important social and relational dimensions are to mental and emotional health.

Participants 3 and 4 displayed the most academic perspectives on the categories and used diagnostic terminology that included references to neurodiverse culture, indicating a personal exposure to it. In cross analyzing the responses from all four participants, the overall pattern indicates that Western Medical frameworks are highly culturally salient among this WSU student group surveyed.

Findings:

Salience is a way of combining frequency, or how many people say a word with prominence, with how soon it comes to mind. Scores were calculated by ranking each item in reverse order on a participants list, dividing by list length, and averaging these across participants (Smith, 1993; Quinlan, 2005). This score indicates how important a word is culturally. Quinlan discussed in her writing how to approach a competent salience analysis, based on Smith's earlier work. First, you identify the salience of the items that are listed for each study participant, ranking the

items on their list in reverse and divide that ranking by the number of items that were listed. Then, you add together the salient scores and divide by the number of participants. “The first break in salience occurs between items that many people think of and those that only some recall” (Quinlan, 2005, pg. 8). The standard to evaluate the saliency of terms used here is determined by placing the boundaries between items mentioned by only one person and terms that encountered frequent shared usage across multiple participants. In the emotions domain words such as “happy” and “sad” formed a core cluster, with outliers such as “chemicals” or “crucial” appearing only once. Therapy was the only universally mentioned term in the treatment approaches domain, which shows the highest salience. On an individual level, salience boundaries were placed following the first two or three items from each participant which held the most shared cultural significance, before their answers devolved into more individually relevant responses.

In the emotional domain, terms such as happy, feelings, and sadness showed the highest cultural salience. Of the mental illness category, anxiety and depression scored highest, which reinforces a biomedical Western viewpoint. The symptomology category yielded sadness, fatigue and hopelessness, which indicates an internalized emotional network. The treatment approaches domain showed therapy as the most salient term across all participants, being universally mentioned and ranked early among all four individuals.

Charts and Graphs:

(A full comprehensive table of all data taken can be found at the end of this document.) When grouped to show a ranking of the 20 most culturally salient words across all categories, the dominance of basic emotional language use and a rudimentary knowledge of treatments was clearly visible. Tables and graphs were generated with the use of ChatGPT AI (OpenAI, 2025), following initial qualitative analysis and calculation of salience scores.

Emotions, Top Five:

Term	Mentioned By	Avg Salience
feelings	2	1
happy	3	0.97
sadness	1	0.933
happiness	1	0.867
sad	3	0.847

Mental Illness Categories, Top Five:

Term	Men- tioned By	Avg Salience
depression	1	1
personal- ity disorders	1	1
Anxiety	2	0.917
depressive disorders	1	0.889
Mood	1	0.8

Symptoms Table, Top Five:

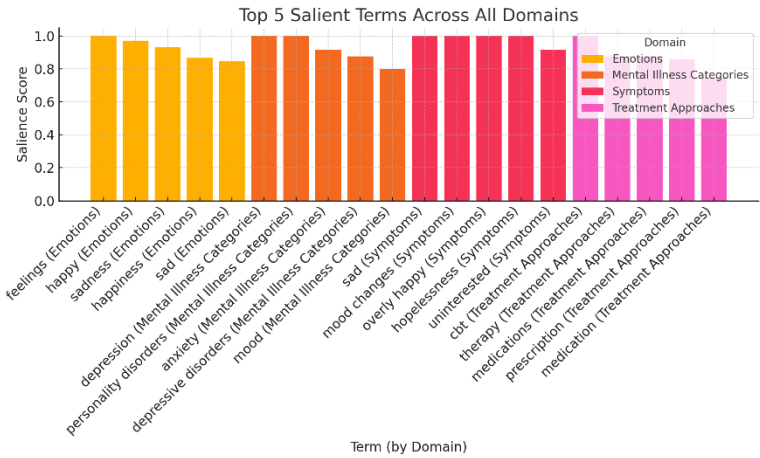
Term	Mentioned By	Avg Sali- ence
Sad	1	1
mood changes	1	1
overly happy	1	1
hopelessness	1	1
uninterested	1	0.917

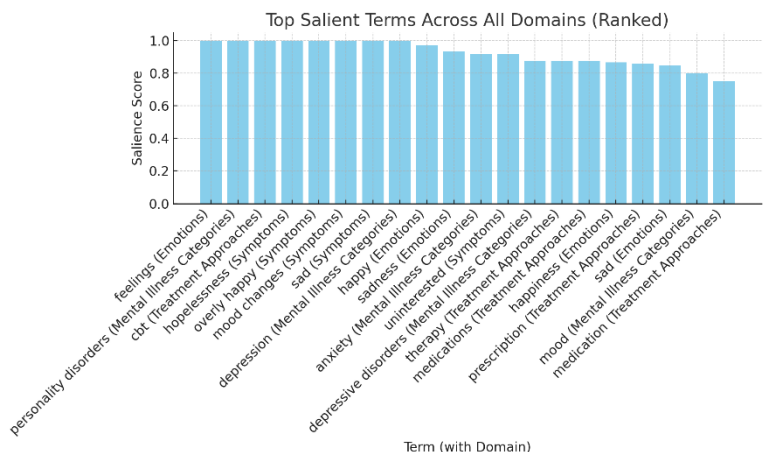
Treatment Table, Top Five:

Term	Mentioned By	Avg Salience

Autism In America

Cbt	1	1
Therapy	4	0.875
medications	1	0.875
prescription	1	0.857
medication	1	0.75





Discussion:

The Quinlan article provided guidance on how to use free listing as a research method, and was referenced as the core technique for this cultural saliency assignment. A simplified breakdown of the article is to count how many times each word appears and look at which words are listed first by the participants. In applying Quinlan's analysis strategies, the most common words are considered the most culturally important and words listed earlier are considered most familiar to the group. The analysis of this research project found that the basic emotions like happiness and sadness got mentioned consistently across all participants, indicating high saliency. Abstract terms were mentioned less frequently, and this finding is actually extremely significant to Western culture in particular, because if we were to extrapolate this data from university students to a global scale, it indicates that Western thinkers probably only have a basic emotional literacy collectively, and that the more abstract or academic understandings which were mentioned less frequently are likely individual deviances and not ideas that are shared culturally on a group level. A few terms that capture abstract emotions such as those that

are less about immediate, concrete feelings and more about nuanced, layered states of being include Ambivalence, Malaise, and Anomie.

These findings suggest a pattern of limited emotional awareness and expression within the Western population that is reflective of broader cultural norms. Participants all prioritized Western treatment methods such as therapy and medication over alternative approaches, such as meditation or community support. The complete absence of any spiritual framework is a major insight into Western cultures' disconnection between mind and body and the absence of spiritual frameworks in Western culture could potentially link to Weber's concept of disenchantment; in the lecture entitled *Science as Vocation* (1917) he theorized that magical and religious beliefs decline in favor of scientific rationality, which also likely correlates to the research participant's education and backgrounds as university students. While this experiment may lack full generalizability due to the small sample size, the randomness with which the participants were chosen would indicate some statistical significance can be extrapolated from these results.

Conclusion:

This cultural saliency study was taken in the Spring quarter of 2025 at the Vancouver campus location of Washington State University and employed free listing, which is a qualitative and quantitative research method. It helps in identifying culturally significant concepts by analyzing the frequency and the order when individuals create a list of terms that relate to a given specific topic. This method is based on the assumption the words listed earlier and most frequently are considered most important pertinent, relevant and culturally salient. By examining the university student research participants responses from their free list samples in depth, this research project has uncovered mental health terms that are most prominent and salient within this given population. This data could also potentially be projected to reflect broader cultural perceptions of mental health on university campuses, or perhaps in the Western culture that these samples were taken from, if these results consistently occur and are replicable. These findings could inform culturally responsive mental health interventions, clinical assessments, or the design of campus wellness programs in the near future.

Table of Salience Study Results, Full and Comprehensive List:

Term	Men- tioned By	Avg Sali- ence
Feelings	2	1
overly happy	1	1
mood changes	1	1
personality dis- orders	1	1
hopelessness	1	1
Depression	1	1
Cbt	1	1
Happy	3	0.97
Anxiety	2	0.917
Uninterested	1	0.917
Helplessness	1	0.9
depressive disor- ders	1	0.889
Sad	4	0.885
Therapy	4	0.875
Medications	1	0.875

Autism In America

Happiness	1	0.867
Prescription	1	0.857
overly spacey	1	0.857
Worried	1	0.833
Mood	1	0.8
low self-esteem	1	0.8
eating habits	1	0.8
Anger	2	0.789
manic disorders	1	0.778
Tired	1	0.75
Medication	1	0.75
electroconvul- sive therapy	1	0.75
Medicine	1	0.75
Fear	1	0.733
Anxious	1	0.727
Sadness	2	0.717
accommodations	1	0.714
not making eye contact	1	0.714

Autism In America

low self-worth	1	0.7
addiction disorders	1	0.667
Mad	1	0.667
Excitement	1	0.667
not hungry	1	0.667
chemical imbalances	1	0.667
Frustration	1	0.667
Content	1	0.636
transcranial magnetic stimulation	1	0.625
low pleasure	1	0.6
Melancholy	1	0.6
sleep problems	1	0.6
Psychotic	1	0.6
unsure of reality	1	0.583
support from loved ones	1	0.571
bad at social cues	1	0.571

Autism In America

Confusion	1	0.556
Neurodegenerative	1	0.556
Annoyed	1	0.545
Crying	1	0.533
Bipolar	1	0.5
support groups	1	0.5
communication with loved ones	1	0.5
Angry	1	0.5
Unmotivated	1	0.5
Emotional	1	0.467
Frustrated	1	0.455
Chronic	1	0.444
Joy	1	0.444
unable to handle loud noises	1	0.429
psychiatrist visit	1	0.429
Sleepy	1	0.417
Intelligence	1	0.4

Autism In America

Confused	1	0.4
Personality	1	0.4
Despair	1	0.4
Mindfulness	1	0.375
Depressed	1	0.333
Mild	1	0.333
Annoyance	1	0.333
Regret	1	0.333
schizophrenic	1	0.333
Grouchy	1	0.333
Fatigue	1	0.3
clinic stays	1	0.286
gets overstimulated easily	1	0.286
Refreshed	1	0.273
disappointment	1	0.267
Upset	2	0.265
Lethargic	1	0.25
peer support	1	0.25

Autism In America

Journaling	1	0.25
make plans with friends	1	0.25
the mind	1	0.222
Severe	1	0.222
Headaches	1	0.2
brain fog	1	0.2
overwhelming	1	0.2
Trauma	1	0.2
Peaceful	1	0.182
Ocd	1	0.167
Scattered	1	0.167
sudden withdrawal	1	0.143
environment support	1	0.143
Crucial	1	0.133
lobotomy (do not)	1	0.125
Chemicals	1	0.111

Autism In America

developmental disorders	1	0.111
overbearing anxiety	1	0.1
Invigorated	1	0.091
missing memories	1	0.083
Stigma	1	0.067

The Language of Identity in Neurodivergent Communities of Practice

The semantic domain that I've chosen to study in this essay is autism and neurodivergent identities, particularly as they are expressed in online communities. In his paper "Autistic Sociology," anthropologist Roy Richard Grinker explored how autism can be understood through an ethnographic examination of autistic culture, particularly in digital spaces. As a late diagnosed autistic woman, online chat rooms, web pages and community spaces written for and by other neurodivergent and autistic individuals provided a sense of personal empowerment and a space to develop a community of practice rooted in mutual adversities, a need for self-advocacy, and resistance to societal expectations. These communities are defined by their shared social experiences and specialized communication styles, which makes them the ideal place for linguistic anthropology to direct future studies. Grinker noted that terms such as masking and infodumping do not appear in traditional diagnostic frameworks, but emerged organically within autistic communities as tools for self-definition and mutual understanding. This makes the autistic community a perfect example for Laura Ahearn's chapter on Language Through Time. This connection is significant because it shows how autistic people have created a lexicon that captures lived realities overlooked by clinical or neurotypical frameworks, demonstrating language as a tool for cultural survival and self-determination. In line with Ahearn's discussion of Language Through Time, the emergence of terms like masking and infodumping illustrates how communities continually reshape language to reflect shifting social conditions, identities, and power dynamics. Autistic linguistic innovation, especially in digital spaces, highlights the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and resistance to dominant narratives.

While Grinkers article acknowledges autistic communities, his academic voice lacks the richly textured vocabulary which emerges within these spaces themselves. These neurodivergent terms are something that

I as an autistic woman encounter and use daily to survive, relate, and express myself, allowing me to be understood more deeply by those who have shared similar experiences. Grinker's paper is an excellent example of how institutional writing often misses or oversimplifies the linguistic self-definition of autistic and neurodivergent people. In contrast, articles written by autistic individuals themselves speak a language of rich lived experience, and are able to more accurately reflect on the emergence of this collective neurodivergent identity. As the internet enables more autistic people to find each other and share their stories, new terminology continues to emerge organically, and captures nuances of the autistic experience that academic writings ignore or dismiss.

For example, masking was not a term I had heard as a child, but I was aware of the behavior because I was doing it myself. I learned to mimic social cues from the people around me like eye contact, small talk, and body language, not necessarily because they came naturally to me but because they were necessary for survival. I found out quickly that due to social norms that punish behaviors which are considered unusual or undesirable, I had to assimilate and learn how to mimic others in order to gain their acceptance and approval. When I infodump about something that I love, whether it's linguistic theory or autism sociopolitics, I'm not just sharing facts, I'm sharing myself. In neuronormative culture this is usually seen as oversharing and others might perceive me as being socially awkward but in the autistic community it's a sign of safety, trust, and a form of shared bonding. This type of neurodivergent specific vocabulary has arisen from a community which centers lived experience over medical framing, and as such, the language being used is relational and emotionally intelligent, crafted through dialogue and shared storytelling.

As Ahearn noted, communities of practice are “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor” (Ahearn, p. 133) and by doing so they develop shared norms, beliefs, and linguistic practices. The autistic and neurodivergent online world is one of the best and most powerful examples of this because their language reflects both the people and the shared practice of resisting neuronormative expectations, healing from trauma, and reimagining social life. These words act like a key to membership in autistic culture. Whenever I hear these terms used, I know that I'm with someone who understands

me and speaks my language. This is what Ahearn meant when she said that “language shapes and is shaped by social relationships and power dynamics” (Ahearn, pg. 26). In contrast, academic language in diagnostic tools such as the DSM or Grinker's paper typically remove agency and nuance, which turns the lived experience into cold and clinical descriptions devoid of empathy and understanding.

Linguistic Sampling

Grinker explored the formation of autistic online communities and argued that the spacious function as communities of practice with their own norms, values and modes of expression. His article used clinical and academic language but acknowledged that autistic individuals are redefining sociology in their own terms. His lexicon lacks the community generated terms that now populate autistic spaces but acknowledges their existence. The key terms that were sampled from his article include autism, autistic sociology, reciprocity, theory of mind, and default interactional matrix.

The Stimpunks Foundation Glossary introduces and critiques the concept of neuronormativity/neurotypicality which is defined as the privileging of neuronormative/neurotypical modes of functioning as an ideal to aspire and compare oneself to. This glossary offers a pointed political and cultural discourse and links neuronormativity to systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and ableism. It challenges top-down diagnostic language and instead promotes terms that empower marginalized neurotypes. The key terms that were sampled from this include neuronormativity, neuroqueering, neuro inclusive, DSM, masking, decentering, deficit model.

The NeuroSpark Health blog offers a neurodivergent framework for emotional connection, and compares it to traditional love languages. This piece identifies behaviors such as info dumping, parallel play, and penguin pebbling that are unique to the neurodivergent and autistic community as meaningful forms of affection, reflecting a definition of intimacy that is based on autistic social experiences. Key terms that were sampled include info dumping, parallel play, body doubling, deep pressure, sharing spoons, penguin pebbling, unmasking.

The Neuroclastic website is written by a autistic self-advocacy group. This article critiques medicalized definitions of autism and instead presents terms such as spiky profile, non-speaking identity, and discusses weavers versus concluders communication styles. Labels such as high functioning are deconstructed to reframe autism as a multidimensional spectrum that is shaped by lived experiences. The key terms sampled here includes spiky profile, double empathy problem, non-speaking, selective mutism, sensory overload, shut down, meltdown, masking, weavers, concluders.

Analysis

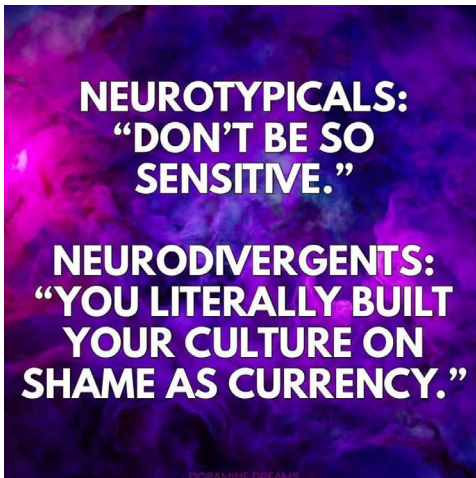
Over the course of this study, the most important and frequently occurring terms include: masking/unmasking, infodumping, stimming, shutdown/meltdown, neuronormativity, double empathy problem, parallel play, body doubling, spiky profile, penguin pebbling, sharing spoons, sensory overload, literal thinking. This community generated lexicon illustrates what Ahearn called a living system of language shaped by social relations and power dynamics. These terms challenge the dominant ideologies surrounding mental health and autism and express solidarity within the neurodivergent community to carve out a new conceptual framework for autistic identity and sociality. This vocabulary has changed dramatically over the last decade or two, making this an exciting and evolving new potential field of linguistic study, illustrating how connection shapes communication. Previous terms like low functioning or Asperger's have been largely rejected within the community to be replaced with expressions that are rooted in affirmation and self-definition. Most of this shift began in the early 2000s with the rise of autistic-led social media spaces, and this continues to evolve through online mutual support, meme culture, and shared identity reclamation. These terms represent more than just ideas; they carry the emotional weight of a shared struggle as well as signaling belonging and membership within this community of practice. Some of these terms such as masking and sensory overload have begun to enter mainstream awareness while others like penguin pebbling and info dumping may only be familiar to those who are neurodivergent.

Term / Concept	Grinker	Stimpunks	NeuroSpark	NeuroClastic
Autistic / Autism	60+	7	5	70+
Neurodivergent / Neurodiversity	1	3	15	7
Neuronormativity	0	19	0	0
Masking / Unmasking	0	2	2	6
Infodumping	0	0	10	0
Spoons / Spoon Theory / Burnout	0	0	6	3
Functioning Labels (critique)	1	1	1	5
Communication Differences	6+	2	3	10+
Sensory Overload / Sensitivities	0	1	2	10+
Self-Advocacy / Identity Politics	10+	5	5	10+
Motor Planning / Apraxia	0	0	0	5
Alexithymia	0	0	0	1
Trauma / PTSD / Misdiagnosis	2	2	1	10+
Queer / Intersectional Themes	0	6	2	6+

While building my list of neurodivergent semantic domain terms, I began with vocabulary which I gathered from my organic lived experience as an autistic woman embedded in online neurodivergent communities and advocacy spaces. Words like masking, info dumping, stimming, shut down, meltdown, double empathy problem, and sensory overload are all part of my everyday lexicon because they reflect survival strategies and communication frameworks within my own community of practice. However, when I surveyed the external sources included here, I discovered several new or underutilized terms which expanded the semantic richness of this domain for me. The term neuro queering found

in the steampunk source represents resistance to conformity through identity. Doombox describes ADHD clutter, and support swapping refers to reciprocal neurodivergent-centered modes of empathy that are different from neuronormative transactional or one directional support.

The vocabulary and specialized linguistics of autism have undergone a profound transformation in recent years from a language of deficit to a language of identity, community, and belonging. These changes have been driven largely by the autistic community themselves through the creation of the internet and the formation of online communities of practice which validate the autistic lived experience and neurodivergent realities. By doing so, these communities have created a lexicon and a culture embodied by that lexicon which includes its own values, humor, rituals, and ways of understanding each other. This essay only scratches the surface of what a full semantic analysis of the neurodivergent and autistic community could reveal but it shows that language is not neutral and carries themes of power and politics within it even in the smallest subcultures of marginalized communities. Studying the autistic community is an example of how naming our experience in our own words allows us to reclaim our place in the world. The rejection of the deficit model and emphasis on the value of autistic lived experiences is slowly rewriting Western cultural narratives and biomedical paradigms through the neurodivergent community of practice.



Linguistic Exclusion and the Broken Social Contract: A Trauma-Informed Critique of English Pragmatics and Performance in face to face and online interactions

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that studies how context contributes to meaning. The pragmatic term “illocutionary acts” refers to the classification of speech by purpose, unspoken meaning, and implications of intent that underlie verbal communication. Examples of illocutionary acts include questions, assertions, demands, complaints, apologies, and greetings; these are all utterances with a specific function that is assumed to be already known to fluent speakers. In this way, our desires and intentions are signaled without needing to state explicitly what one thinks or wants. People who struggle with social cues such as autistic individuals have considerable difficulty with this, and adult interactions are often difficult for children to make sense of, because their understanding of pragmatic reasoning is still developing. I have experienced repeated social rejections throughout the course of my life because I struggle to shift the terms of address that I use with others, such as Dr. or Professor, preferring informal structures, and I struggle to attribute significant meaning or distinction to social status or hierarchy.

The connection between pragmatics, performance, and the social contract is actually very profound, particularly when we think of the social contract as an ongoing everyday negotiation of meaning and belonging that informs our behavior. Every illocutionary act is essentially a mini social contract and a relational agreement to either uphold or challenge established social norms. Because I have delayed or underdeveloped pragmatic reasoning and struggle with social cues, I have low cultural competence, and have been subject to repeated rejections and abandonment from family, peers, employers, coworkers, classmates and teachers. But from my perspective, my violations of the social contract were not the actual problem; unspoken expectations of how to relate with

others which are implied through illocutionary acts are at fault. The film *Arrival* (2016) explored the challenges that a linguist would encounter when attempting to learn a new language completely divorced from the human experience. As an autistic woman who struggles socially, I have felt divorced from this my entire life, and have studied my own culture from an outsider perspective in an attempt to fit in and belong. I feel uniquely qualified to offer my commentary on the most crucial question that anthropologists are tasked with, how is language an intrinsic component of social life?

Linguistic competence doesn't just refer to grammar, but also to the ability to use said grammar in a culturally appropriate way. Cultural competence online underscores how “the same issues that divide communities of practice in face-to-face life are accentuated in online communication. There is also less of a filter on excluding or shaming those who are not as familiar with conventions as others” (Wilkinson, 2024). In online environments the tone, facial cues, and other physical status signals that people typically use during in-person conversation are hidden, which leads to the implicit contracts embedded in language to break down, creating misunderstandings, offense taking, and even baiting or trolling for emotional reactions from others. When this shared context that helps maintain the social contract framework vanishes in digital spaces the automatic social scripts that we've learned also disappear, meaning that online communication requires us to renegotiate the terms of the social contract constantly. Individuals lacking cultural competency are at a significant disadvantage in online spaces for this reason. Placing the burden of knowledge on the speaker to automatically understand which contract is in place across cultures, generations, and professional rules can be challenging, particularly for socially disadvantaged individuals who struggle to understand context. In the absence of embodied cues, pragmatics becomes the main stage for linguistic performance, which means that cultural competence now also includes platform competence in the digital sphere, because humans are now being required to understand how to “read the room” in chats, emails, or video calls where there is no literal room to read.

Reading a Room with No Walls: Masking, Meaning, and Broken Social Contracts

Online and offline, people perform aspects of themselves selectively to control how they are perceived. This is referred to as impression management or identity curation and is the idea that we are always acting in response to context. Autistic masking and impression management are similar because they both involve social strategies but autistic masking is a more intense, pervasive, and potentially harmful form of identity management that is driven by a need to belong and to avoid social stigmatizing, whereas impression management is usually more of a conscious choice. As an autistic person I have found the experience of masking or being forced to camouflage my autistic traits and behaviors extremely exhausting; being required to maintain a constant facade for the public has led to daily episodes of depression and anxiety. Culturally, impression management is considered to be a valuable social skill, but it can also lead to inauthenticity and stress when overused. The underlying social mechanism and common denominator between both masking and identity curation is a fear of receiving the negative reactions of others, and an attempt to gain social advantages by eliciting positive impressions. So people curate their identities to avoid judgment or shame, to avoid exclusion or punishment and fear, and to gain approval, protection, or access to social power. The consequences of authenticity in fear-based systems are social exile, ridicule, or even economic loss. Due to the social contract being fear and shame-based, this results in Western culture's pathological emotional avoidance which lies at the root of its current ongoing mental health crisis.

While America may hold as an ideal the equality of all people and consider itself a fairly informal culture, speakers are still engaged in a game to assert their status. We see this in the illocutionary act of greeting someone, where going first acknowledges one's lower status to the other person. Language pragmatics reveal who is expected to defer, who has authority, and who gets to set the rules. A non-punitive social contract grounded in mutual care rather than judgment would not consider status or power in the same ways. It would still involve some form of identity being expressed, but these identities would be fluid, expressive and relational, not strategic, defensive or curated to hide shame. That world would involve performance as a way to connect, not just out of self-interest or survival. In such a world, digital culture online would also shift to prioritize relational safety, mutual understanding and curiosity at the

outset of communication as opposed to habitual conflicts and transactional performances.

The social contract in Western society has been shaped by a close relationship with hierarchy and control, which can be traced back to feudalism, imperial law, patriarchy, punitive religion and binary morality which were all aspects of colonialism and historical conquest. These systems relied on internalized behavioral regulation or “herd mentality” to ensure populations were easily governable, and language was the primary mechanism to enforce these norms. For instance, English and Old English evolved from Proto-Germanic, which was shaped by warrior societies such as the Anglo-Saxons and Norse. Their law was not restorative, it was transactional and steeped in hierarchical reparation, not in empathy. These values are clearly expressed through a language that is binary in nature which places particular emphasis on honor, shame and social reputation. These dualistic concepts can be found in words like “wyrd” which refers to the concept of fate as unyielding and inflexible, “wit” which linked knowledge with survival and obedience, or the term “shamefast” which was a precursor for our word modesty, and literally meant “held by shame.” The Proto-Indo-European (PIE) worldview is highly binary and hierarchical in structure. The language encodes status, gender, agency and deservingness, and links power with clarity and directness and subordination with passivity and silence. Black and white binaries are reflected in categories such as active and passive, animate and inanimate, sacred and profane. This cultural linguistic cognitive system both reflects and reinforces rigid social stratification, moral absolutism and misogyny in its coding and signaling which Goffman referenced as “animation, author and principal” and which Ahearn discusses in her book extensively.

Binary Grammar, Broken World: How English Encodes Shame and Enables Control

Fear and shame show up not just in the content linguistically but in the actual structure of the grammar itself. Relying on a binary tense and modality, such as a linear time bound logic, expresses and enforces internalized authority and normalizes forms of social surveillance. Modal verbs like must, should, have or ought to are used as a form of behavioral control through fear of collective moral judgment. The structure of

English as subject-verb-object centers the author, which reinforces judgment, shame, blame, punitive punishment, the binary moral frame of a victim and perpetrator, and creates a social structure based around power and control. This grammar assigns agency and responsibility by implying that someone is doing something to someone else, and creates a lens through which shame and blame as well as power are implied through illocutionary acts. We can see this reflected in the external world clearly in the Duluth Wheel Model, which identifies power dynamics and controlling behaviors as the pattern of actions that the West commonly refers to as “abuse.” In this way we can connect how language not only is an intrinsic component of social life but also shapes the perceptions, behaviors and experiences of its speakers.



DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROGRAMS
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Today, these deep roots of a culture based on fear and survival manifest themselves in our educational systems which prioritize correctness over curiosity, legal systems that rely on punitive measures as opposed to restorative justice, performative social rituals around politeness built on shame and avoidance rather than authentic connection, and in online culture that weaponizes identity as a tool of compliance or exclusion. SVO grammar positions the subject cognitively as the victim with external objects becoming a scapegoat. The sentence structure itself is hiding the power and balance by granting grammatical agency to the abuser and blaming the recipient for the action. English is essentially a form of grammatical gaslighting where authors performatively cast themselves linguistically as benevolent actors while subjectively framing the choices and realities of others coercively using modal verbs.

Here's an example that illustrates how English SVO (Subject–Verb–Object) grammar can hide power dynamics and shift blame:

- Sentence: “She made me angry.”
 - Grammatical structure: Subject (she) → Verb (made) → Object (me).
 - Effect: The agency is placed on “her” as the cause of the anger, while the speaker (the one actually experiencing the emotion) is cast as the passive recipient. This structure removes responsibility from the speaker’s internal state and frames the other person as the scapegoat.

Another, more coercive example with modal verbs:

- Sentence: “You should have known better.”
 - Here the subject (you) is positioned as failing a moral obligation, while the implied speaker’s authority is hidden in the modal verb should. It linguistically constructs the speaker as a benevolent guide, yet coercively defines the other person’s reality as deficient.

In both cases, English grammar allows the abuser’s perspective to dominate by making their interpretation of events appear objective and by placing blame onto the recipient of the action. Healthy relationships rely on mutual agency and dialectical complexity, which the English

grammar does not readily accommodate. However, these things are common in indigenous languages. Wolof linguistics focuses on the study of a West African language spoken primarily in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania. It is also a Subject-Verb-Object language with a rigid word order, which accounts for the “game” that speakers engage in to assert their status linguistically. According to the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, SVO and SOV together account for more than 87% of the world's languages, which is a factual example for the Tower of Babel parable spoken about in the Bible. The SVO structure trains English speakers to seek a single agent and a single responsible party in any interaction, which reduces cognitive complexity and the ability to switch perspectives, effectively severing an individual from their empathetic capacity. There are some indigenous and non-Indo-European languages such as Navajo, Tagalog, and Hawaiian that do not default to SVO and include aspects or experienced-based grammar structures which better capture reciprocal action, fluid identities, and context-based understandings. These languages challenge the very logic that coercive control relies on, and actually embody the ideal of equality that America continues to aspire to. When the social contract doesn't include, protect, or even recognize everyone it is not just broken, it has become a tool of exclusion and systemic violence. A true social contract must be reciprocal, inclusive, and protective. If it only functions for certain groups in a society, then it's a compliance demand and coercive control method that is being masked as an illocutionary act. When a traumatized person is reacting to a trigger and their behavior is misunderstood and stigmatized, or when an autistic person is socially rejected by their peers who moralize and judge their behavior, they are not being covered by a social contract, they are being dehumanized by the very contract which is supposed to be protecting them. This signals that the contract was never meant to include them in the first place, which is linguistically reinforced ableism.

The Grammar of Control: How SVO Structure Reinforces Social Exclusion and Totalitarian Logic

When SVO structure is inherently agent focused, action assigned, and blame-centered this becomes dehumanizing for people with atypical behavior patterns, especially autistics whose communication style does not align with typical pragmatics, trauma survivors whose behavior may seem irrational or non-compliant, and people in active distress who may

not be able to produce SVO friendly speech patterns. Defining a person through their supposed disruption of social norms is linguistic pathology and systemic violence disguised as rationality. The existing social contract presents relational breakdowns as personal failures in order to maintain power. When you combine a binary grammar with a cultural lens that moralizes emotional and behavioral regulation and a social contract built for productivity, compliance, and hierarchy, you get a social system where autistics are viewed as rude, traumatized people are seen as unstable and unworthy, and mentally ill people are criminalized or infantilized. Language is a mechanism for exclusion and as such, is unable to be used as a vehicle in Western culture to respond to systems, histories, or pain. It is for this very reason that structural inequities and inequalities continue to persist, and mass extinction events continue to repeat throughout history. Until the world adopts a shared grammar that is trauma-informed and inclusive, it will continue global patterns of structural inequities in the form of repetition compulsion, failing to learn from its history because binary linguistics is the mechanism specifically limiting the cognitive and empathetic capacity needed to create lasting effective change.

Unlike some other countries, the United States Constitution does not specify an official language, however, English has served as the primary communication of government, commerce, and daily life and has also been the *de facto* language since the country's inception. Until America changes their grammar, they cannot change the colonial mindset responsible for the governance that they were attempting to flee when severing ties with the British; a new world demanded a new language, and because that was not incorporated, this world is still dragging around the corpse of the last one, along with all of its generational curses and karma. The United States was founded on a set of beliefs; among them was the idea that all people are created equal, whether European, Native American, Latinx or African American, and that all people have the same fundamental rights, such as liberty, free speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, and freedom of assembly. These are important and worthy ideals to aspire to but even though the founding fathers may have had the right idea, their attempt is doomed to fail without addressing the linguistic framework responsible for shaping colonial social systems.

SVO structure can facilitate the kind of cognitive framing and the emotional conditioning necessary for totalitarian systems to gain and hold power. It enables and supports authoritarianism by encouraging linear, causal World views which are ethically reductive, stripping complexity from social reality which makes it easier for totalitarian narratives to take hold by offering citizens simple explanations, clear enemies, and externalized blame. This framing is foundational to propaganda and flattens systemic issues into morally charged individual actions. SVO grammar gives agency to some and strips it from others which reinforces systems of control, fear, and obedience. Totalitarianism gains a foothold in society when people stop seeing each other as complex human beings with deep internal realities and instead start seeing them as objects or threats. Because SVO grammar does not accommodate context, interdependency or distributed agencies it inhibits perspective taking, empathy, collective responsibility, and holistic problem solving, and it supports othering through the linguistic distancing of the subject (us) from the object (them). Fascist and totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR both used propaganda that was saturated with SVO structures and weaponized its cognitive tendencies to facilitate mass compliance, fear-based identity formation, and systematic dehumanization. Grammatical framing shapes cognition and can be weaponized.

Here are some concrete examples of SVO structures in fascist and totalitarian propaganda that show how subject–verb–object grammar can distance, scapegoat, and dehumanize:

1.Nazi Germany:

- “The Jews corrupt our nation.”

Subject (The Jews) are framed as the active agents of destruction, while the collective “our nation” is cast as the passive victim. The sentence strips away historical, social, and political complexity and instead attributes blame to a singular, scapegoated group.

- “We will purify Germany.”

The collective “we” (Aryans, Nazis) are positioned as benevolent actors, while the implied “object” (those deemed impure) is linguistically erased and dehumanized.

2.Stalinist USSR:

- “Enemies of the people sabotage progress.”

Agency is given to a vague category of “enemies,” blamed as active perpetrators of systemic failures. The larger structural issues (like poor planning or policy) are hidden, creating a scapegoat.

- “We must eliminate traitors.”

The modal verb “must” frame the action as moral necessity, while “traitors” (a constructed label) becomes the object of eradication, distancing empathy and making violence appear rational.

Both regimes leaned heavily on SVO structures like “X threatens Y” or “We must stop them” to build identity through fear and othering. The grammar itself reinforced binaries like us/them, victim/culprit, pure/impure, and thus supported mass compliance and emotional detachment from the suffering of the “object.” Should the planet desire to develop a political theory that is based on trauma-informed communication and linguistic ethics, it would need to move away from communication and social interactions based on binary moral logic. To build a truly just society that celebrates diversity, equity, and inclusion, we must reimagine the grammar that underpins it.

Resilience Restoration: Decolonizing Mental Health Through Language Reclamation

“Your Indigenous language is the antidote, the medicine, the cleanser, and immunity to colonization.” -Tiokasin Ghosthorse

Phil Borges’ TEDx Talk “Psychosis or Spiritual Awakening” (2014) explores ideas surrounding indigenous views on mental health resilience, redefining experiences that the West labels as psychosis through a more holistic and collectivist lens. He tells a story of a young man who was hearing voices, seeing visions, and behaving erratically. With support, the man integrated his visions and became a respected healer. In indigenous societies, individuals exhibiting symptoms receive guidance from mentors leading to roles in their communities, whereas in the West those same behaviors might be pathologized, medicated, stigmatized and treated in isolation. Borges suggests that embracing indigenous models of relating could lead to more effective mental health treatments, creating a framework of communal responsibility, which starkly contrasts with the Western culture’s individualized deficit model. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2008) criticized the Western clinical model of trauma, especially PTSD, as being too culturally narrow. She argued that resilience is not the absence of suffering but the capacity to live meaningfully in the midst of it. The common idea underlying both Borges and Scheper-Hughes discussions is that meanings, narratives and shared worldviews have abilities to transform the ways that we understand and treat trauma and distress. This insight acts as a springboard into a discussion on how grammar, social scripts, culture and worldview shape the way that we experience and define mental health. “Language, culture, and social relations are so thoroughly intertwined that they must be studied in connection to each other” (Ahearn, 2021, p. 34). The following interdisciplinary critique connects linguistic anthropology with psychological theory and decolonial, trauma-informed ethics to challenge dominant mental health paradigms and narratives around resilience.

In *Culture and Conduct: An Excursion in Anthropology*, Richard A. Barrett (1984) argued that the underlying mechanism that governs human behavior is culture; a dynamic shared system of meanings, symbols and expectations that people use to make sense of their world. Barrett specifically emphasized that people act according to internalized mental frameworks that are shaped by their culture, which in turn shapes their ideas about right and wrong, relationships, and emotional expression to create a mixture of learned models, social roles and systems of meaning. Linguistic anthropologists such as Ahearn, Whorf, and Sapir have long argued that language doesn't just reflect thought, it shapes it. Psychological anthropologists and attachment theorists are increasingly pointing towards the fact that language is not only a tool of communication but also a cognitive scaffold, framing the social map that we navigate the world with.

When the linguistic container for our thoughts is shaped by hierarchy and binary constraint, the psychological development of children is radically different than produced by a language based on fluidity and relationality. My earlier essay "Linguistic Exclusion and the Broken Social Contract" (Snow, 2025) identified language, particularly pragmatics, grammar and illocutionary acts, as the key symbolic medium which Barrett also saw behavior being shaped culturally by. I argue that the structure of English limits empathy and systemic reform, turning language itself into a prison and tool of control. Barrett likely would interpret my work as a cultural critique that exposes and seeks to reshape the symbolic system underlying social behavior. Dominant cultural models encoded in English, particularly through the use of Subject-Verb-Object grammar and modal verbs, silently reinforce hierarchy, shame, and social exclusion as behavior reinforcement mechanisms in Western culture. Behaviorally, this results in internalized culturally learned scripts that cause individuals to mask their emotions, perform hierarchy and seek social status unconsciously. Barrett would likely interpret this as an example of how cultural scripts are not neutral but prioritize certain cognitive and communicative behaviors, marginalizing others. I might counter, then, that cultural scripts lack neutrality due to being based on a SVO linguistic structure which results in binary cognition. In such a culture, illocutionary acts show by exclusion and punitive consequences how Western pragmatic conventions are deeply cultural performances that tie

belonging to power and script social interactions through a culture based on shame and fear.

“Linguistic Exclusion and the Broken Social Contract” (Snow, 2025) was a call for cultural transformation through linguistic reform, pushing for more inclusive meaning systems and to move away from Proto-Indo-European influences. If the West was grounded in a non-PIE language model such as Lakota, Tagalog, or Hawaiian, the structure of the language would literally create a different kind of social world, one where people attune to each other relationally. Lakota doesn’t require subjects or objects and focuses on action and relation rather than fixing agency, encoding interdependence and reciprocity into verbs. Hawaiian is topic-prominent, placing emphasis on what is being discussed rather than who is doing and to whom. Tagalog uses systems that shift verbs to highlight different participants, so there are no fixed “doer” and context determines salience, not hierarchy. Both Hawaiian and Tagalog use aspect, not tense, leading to a growth mindset and compassion-based process with less emphasis on fixed moral identity or permanence of action; this creates a society founded on restorative, not punitive, justice.

Here’s an example using Tagalog, which has a focus system that allows the speaker to highlight different participants in the same action. Instead of fixing blame on a “doer,” the grammar shifts according to context and perspective:

- Actor-focus (doer emphasized): Kumain ang bata ng mansanas.
→ “The child ate an apple.” (focus on the child as actor)
- Object-focus (receiver emphasized): Kinain ng bata ang mansanas.

→ “The apple was eaten by the child.” (focus on the apple as the salient participant)

Both sentences describe the same event, but the grammar allows the speaker to decide what aspect of the action is most relevant without creating a rigid hierarchy of blame or identity.

In Hawaiian, where aspect rather than tense is central, the emphasis is on the ongoing nature of action rather than fixed endpoints:

- Ke ‘ai nei ke keiki i ka ‘āpala.

→ “The child is eating the apple.” (focus on process, not completion or moral evaluation)

This framing cultivates a worldview where actions are seen as processes that can change and grow, rather than as permanent marks of identity. Someone who made a mistake is understood as being in process, capable of transformation, rather than as a fixed “wrongdoer.” This is why societies grounded in such grammars tend toward restorative justice, focusing on repair and learning rather than punishment.

The implications this has for sociality is profound; the decentering of agency reduces binary morality and creates space for mutual responsibility, meaning relationships become collaborative instead of transactional, identity fluid and contextual instead of being role bound and hierarchical. Empathy is structurally encoded in non-PIE languages, because they require consideration of context, perspective, and nuance.

Because emotion is encoded into language, feelings also structure culture. For instance, in a relational, non-PIE culture you might experience and interpret the breakup of a relationship fundamentally differently than the way this is handled in a Western individualistic culture, who views selfhood as autonomous, bounded individuals. A relational language world defines selfhood through relationship, not in opposition to others, and relationships themselves are characterized by continuity and reciprocity, evolving without collapsing. Emotions would be processed communally with language that emphasizes shared time, mutual learning, and appreciation for individual growth. When identity is relationally embedded, individual egos aren’t threatened by endings in the same way, because endings are seen as cycles, not severings.

In a society where language is non-binary, relational, and context rich, children and adolescents wouldn’t develop behavioral issues as we know them in Western culture either, because in collectivist societies behavior is seen as communicative and not problematic. Adults in these cultures tend to respond to distress with co-regulation rather than punishment, which builds emotional resilience and intelligence (EQ). Children grow up with a strong sense of worth in a culture where there is always a “we” before “me,” meaning that there is no need for adolescents to rebel when asserting their selfhood. And there is absolutely no need to mask, or to

performatively win love and belonging in a relational culture. Children also develop with systemic cognitive processes and with the ability to share multiple perspectives when languages model complexity (as opposed to PIE and SVO's reductive grammar structures). What the West considers behavioral disorders are typically reactions to children having natural responses to their autonomy being violated, experiencing emotional invalidation, resisting rigid social roles being imposed on them, rebelling against shame-based control systems, or reacting to disconnection and cultural dysfunction found in their immediate environment. If none of these structural features existed, then pathology would have no reason to emerge. This means that behavior is ultimately not about children, it's a mirror of a culture's dysfunction and deviance from attunement. Barrett, Ahearn, Chomsky, Sapir and Whorf would all say that to change the grammar is to change the world, and I concur; when a language doesn't encode dysfunction, the mirror reflects balance and harmony.

Linguistic norms rooted in hierarchies and adult centered models result in systemic biases against children and create a framework for Western psychiatric models that prioritize individual pathology over relational context, which I have also written about in another essay "Embracing the Challenge: A Call to Decolonize Psychiatry and Restore Relational Humanity" (Snow et al., 2025). Because both Western linguistic and psychiatric models assume children are less than fully human, framing them as undeveloped adults, their behavior becomes interpreted through an adult lens, pathologizing distress without acknowledging social and relational dynamics and their impacts on behavior. A non-binary and relational culture would collectively see deviant behavior or relational ruptures as signals that the entire system is imbalanced and in need of repair. In contrast to Tagalog and Hawaiian, Western languages and psychiatric frameworks embed hierarchies into their very grammar and diagnostic categories, which normalize power imbalances and marginalize children as "incomplete adults" rather than as full relational beings. This creates a feedback loop: the language of pathology reinforces the psychiatric model, and the psychiatric model validates the linguistic framing, both converging to individualize distress and obscure systemic responsibility. A non-binary and relational culture, by contrast, would interpret deviant behavior not as evidence of a defective individual but as

a form of collective communication, where behavioral signals point to relational ruptures or systemic imbalance that must be addressed through repair, not punishment. In such a paradigm, children's distress would be understood as diagnostic of the health of the broader community, not simply of the child themselves.

"Linguistic Exclusion and the Broken Social Contract" (Snow, 2025) was an emic challenge to Western ethnocentrism, explaining how English pragmatics and SVO grammar encode shame, hierarchy and compliance into our language, culture and cognitive process. The linguistic expectation that meaning must be inferred from context (illocutionary acts) dehumanizes the vulnerable members of society it is meant to protect. "Embracing the Challenge: A Call to Decolonize Psychiatry and Restore Relational Humanity" (Snow et al, 2025) showed both psychiatry and language in Western society are built on the same framework of control, compliance, and exclusion, and aligns with Barrett's view that social structure is enacted through communication. My argument reframed behavior as linguistic exclusion as opposed to developmental concern or flaw, and could be seen as a radical extension of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, where linguistic moralism reinforces cultural conformity. Barrett emphasized the importance of the relationship between behavioral diversity and social change, but also noted that in tribal societies, "individual nonconformity and the deliberate pursuit of originality" are less common (Barrett, 1984, p. 180) which implies that cultural conformity can be achieved through adoption of a non-binary, relational, and context rich language without having to use coercive, fear or shame-based frameworks that negatively impact human development and behavior.

When Durkheim said that crime and non-conformity must exist in every society, he linked them directly to the requirements of change. His ideas tie in directly to "The Evolution of Hope and Despair," where Nesse explored how hope being promoted by societies to maintain order is actually an interdependent function that pairs with societal institutions' pathologizing of despair to discourage systemic disruption. (It should be strongly noted that both Nesse and Durkheim's theories arose from PIE and SVO binary cognitive processes, meaning there is a consistent error in their reasoning, as is in all of Western thought, being based on a fundamentally flawed binary and linear premise.) Framing resilience not as a fixed moral virtue or trait but as an evolved emotional regulatory

capacity, Nesse believed that it functioned as a mediating shift between hope and despair, emerging from an individual's ability to read their environment for behavioral cues. To keep citizens compliant, Western culture pathologizes emotions and mood systems that evolved from our ancestor's non-binary, relational language and their natural protective responses; due to this, humanity's resilience mechanisms are now easily dysregulated and overwhelmed by modern demands.

The Hope Vale Pelican Project was a community-based storytelling initiative that took place in a Aboriginal community in Australia in 2008. It provided a powerful example of narrative sovereignty, where the Guugu Yimithirr Bama community documented ancestral wisdom and their lived experiences for future generations. The Guugu Yimithirr Bama culture is deeply rooted in relational and land-based systems of knowledge. The word Bama means "person" or "human", so their name directly translates to "people who speak Guugu Yimithirr." Their affiliation with language reflects a relational awareness that is evident in their use of cardinal directions instead of left or right, which has been studied in cognitive linguistics to show how language can shape spatial reasoning and a shared worldview. Their kinship system extends beyond people to include animals, plants, and even geography. Nominative-accusative groups the two subjects together. Ergative-absolutive groups the intransitive subject and the transitive object together. The Guugu Yimithirr language follows a flexible free word order and its ergative-absolutive system differs from English's nominative-accusative system, exemplifying how language both reflects and shapes worldview, resulting in the Guugu Yimithirr placing high value on social relationships and reciprocity. A nominative-accusative system treats all subjects the same, whereas an ergative-absolutive groups its intransitive and transitive subjects differently, emphasizing agency and tying into moral reasoning; this touches on the intersection between Linguistic Relativity, Grammar and Cognitive Anthropology.

Colonization is the process of psychosocial fragmentation, where a human is disconnected from relational safety, collective memory and meaning, and their sense of belonging is replaced with a culture of fear, control, conformity and extraction. Replacing language has historically speaking been one of the first and most powerful steps in colonization, because language is also our ontology, or the ways we see and understand

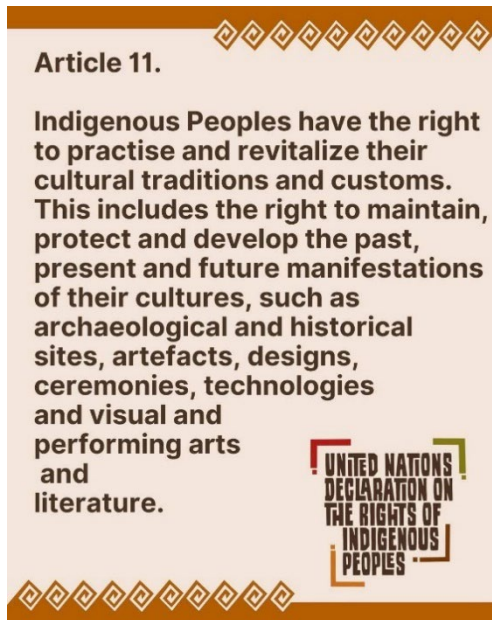
the world and the ways we relate to it and each other. When colonizers take away language, they also strip away the social rules and relational intelligence that are embedded in ancestral speech patterns. Language replacement is both the scalpel and a spell that binds, severing people from who they are and casting them into roles that serve the colonizer's interests. Controlling language controls thought, identity and memory. In Ireland, the British systematically suppressed Gaelic, and in Canada and the Americas, indigenous children were forced into boarding schools. In Africa, European languages were imposed with natives being treated as primitive. African slaves were separated from those who spoke the same language to prevent rebellion. French, British, and Spanish empires all imposed their languages across Asia, Africa and the Americas to dominate culture through the mind, beginning with the tongue.

The Founding Fathers of the United States were attempting to escape British authoritarianism by creating a republic based on Enlightenment-era ideals of liberty, freedom, and autonomy as well as a system of checks and balances that they felt had been missing under British rule. However, while they were resisting authoritarianism as it applied to their own self-interests and class privileges, they did not extend those ideals universally and still participated in systems of oppression, with many Fathers participating in slavery and limiting property as well as barring rights for women, African-American and indigenous people. There is a strong argument to be made that English's SVO structure reinforces power dynamics that contradict rather than uphold America's stated values of liberty, equality, and democracy because SVO reinforces binary, linear, and hierarchical forms of logic, mirroring authoritarian control-based relationships and using linguistic programming to trap individuals in unconscious behavior patterns. Ergative-absolutive languages, polysynthetic languages, and topic-prominent languages all tend to align more with values like collective responsibility, interdependence, and mutual respect, which arguably reflect America's aspirations better than Empire's English embedded contradictions within the Constitution. If the Great American Experiment is to succeed, it will need to evolve beyond its colonial and authoritarian roots; SVO or "colonial colloquialism" should be replaced with a relational language that is better suited to supporting American ideals.

This conversation is particularly relevant to the concept of resilience in mental health because most mental health narratives are framed in SVO terms, centering the individual as the agent. This implies a solitary actor, disconnected from systemic or relational contexts, creating the myth of internal willpower and individual heroism. Removing context and rewarding compliance and conformity reframes resilience as being about adapting to or overcoming dysfunction, and denies the possibility of transforming it. In some indigenous cultures there is no distinction between the phrase “I heal you” and “we become whole together”; this knowledge of interconnectedness and relational debt is what we have lost to colonialism. When SVO syntax centers control and conquest, language holds human mental health hostage, denying collective healing. To foster true resilience will require full decolonization, not only of systems of care but also of the very language through which we imagine healing to occur.

We need to act before it is too late (Mobayed, 2023). Perhaps we can look to our animal relatives for inspiration. An article from 2018 (Solly) revealed new findings on the evolution of language, challenging the assumption that only humans are capable of displaced reference, a key aspect of abstract thought, which is integral to linguistic evolution. The New York Times (Angier, 2004) reported on a group of baboons who experienced a benevolent social and behavioral transformation after the violent and dominant males were killed during an outbreak of tuberculosis. And of key importance to this particular discussion is a group of young mountain gorillas found to show surprising resilience in the face of adversity (Price, 2023). According to five decades’ worth of data on hundreds of mountain gorillas, the findings emphasize the protective factors of tight knit groups and of flexible social structure in addition to having access to plentiful resources. These primate case studies are evidence that relational systems can reorganize themselves when the most coercive, dominating influences are removed. Colonial languages, however, work in the opposite direction: rather than allowing benevolence and cooperation to flourish, they encode and perpetuate domination, hierarchy, and violence in their very grammar and metaphors. Where baboons and gorillas show us, that non-coercive social systems are possible, colonial languages corrupt this potential by training humans to normalize control, othering, and deference to authority as the default mode

of communication. In this way, the animal studies illustrate what is possible without domination, and the linguistic critique shows why colonial societies repeatedly fail to achieve it. Using language to shape a shared worldview and rewrite our cultural narrative as discussed by Borges and Scheper-Hughes would be the first step to achieving a decolonized West, and is the path to the America that was originally promised by the colonizing Founding Fathers.



Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) & Mirror Integration Theory (MIT): A Simple Summary

Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) invites us to see conflict not as something to avoid, but as something that can help us grow together. Relationships have the potential to be our biggest catalyst for growth. In our current systems, conflict is often treated as dangerous or shameful, so we suppress it, punish it, or label it as pathology. But when we do that, we lose the opportunity to listen to what our pain is trying to show us.

FCP teaches that conflict is a relational signal. Like somatic pain in the body, conflict draws attention to areas between people, communities, or institutions, where something is out of alignment. Instead of asking, “Who to blame?” we can ask, “What needs care, repair, or re-balancing between us?” It teaches us to be thankful for every person who upsets us, because they are mirrors offering us a personal growth workshop that’s been custom designed just for us. Instead of rejecting our triggers or using boundaries as walls, we sign up and complete the work so that we don’t keep repeating the same lessons over and over again.

Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) builds on this by reminding us that relationships are mirrors. What triggers us in others is often a reflection of an internal part of ourselves that we were taught to reject. The people who activate us are not the problem; they are our mirror and an invitation to heal. When someone stirs something painful in us, they are showing us where we are still tender. Rather than push them away, we can choose to honor the reflection they’ve offered and meet ourselves with compassion. MIT isn’t about blaming or fixing each other; it’s about recognizing that healing is mutual. When we show up to our relationships with openness, our shared wounds become the entry point to shared growth. The dysfunction we see between us is not a sign of failure; it is a sign that something unintegrated is ready to be felt and understood.

When we bring FCP and MIT together, we create a relational framework that helps us transform conflict into connection. FCP helps us recognize that conflict is functional; it points us toward healing. MIT shows

us that every moment of tension is also a moment of reflection and an opportunity for integration, not isolation.

In our relationships, this looks like:

- Responding to emotional friction with curiosity instead of blame
- Seeing relational ruptures as signals, not as signs of failure
- Asking together, “What is this moment revealing about our shared unmet needs, and what do we want to build instead?”
- Welcoming the parts of ourselves and each other that were previously exiled, feared, or silenced

In our communities and systems, this looks like:

- Creating institutions that treat conflict as meaningful, not dangerous
- Replacing punishment with collective regulation, reflection, and repair
- Understanding that social crises, like inequality, polarization, or disconnection, are symptoms of relational trauma, not moral failings
- Building cultures that reward vulnerability, attunement, and shared accountability

Institutions that embody Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) and Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) would treat conflict as meaningful information rather than as a threat to stability. In education, this could look like trauma-informed schools that replace zero-tolerance discipline with restorative justice circles, allowing students to reflect on needs, rebuild trust, and repair relationships rather than being suspended or expelled. In the criminal justice system, instead of prisons focused on punishment and isolation, restorative and transformative justice models, as seen in Norway’s rehabilitative prisons or community-led justice projects in the U.S., view crime as a symptom of relational rupture and create opportunities for accountability, dialogue, and reintegration. Governance could follow this same pattern, moving beyond adversarial partisan debate toward citizens’ assemblies, such as those used in Ireland, where diverse people come together to deliberate on issues like climate change and

social policy in ways that foster collective reflection rather than polarization. In healthcare and mental health, this approach would move away from pathologizing distress as individual dysfunction toward trauma-informed and peer-led models, such as Finland's Open Dialogue, where symptoms are treated as meaningful responses to relational wounds and addressed through community conversation. Even workplaces could transform by shifting away from rigid hierarchies toward collaborative models like sociocracy, where dissent and conflict are valued as feedback that highlights systemic imbalance. Across these examples, the guiding principle is the same: conflict becomes an opportunity for repair, reflection, and integration, not a failure to be suppressed.

When we stop seeing conflict as a threat and start seeing it as a mirror, we shift from control to connection. We stop managing each other and start healing with each other. The people who challenge us the most often reveal the parts of us that are most in need of love.

The path of re-integration is not meant to be walked alone, but together.

Love is the medicine.

This understanding is not new. Long before neuroscience or systems theory, Buddhist philosophy taught that the self is not a fixed or separate entity, but a fluid process arising in relationship to all things. In the Buddhist view, suffering comes not from conflict itself, but from the illusion of separation and the belief that we are alone in our pain, or that we must protect ourselves from one another. But when we recognize that we are already connected, that we co-arise in every moment through interdependence, we begin to relate to each other not as threats, but as reflections. Every interaction becomes an opportunity to awaken, to remember that we are not fragments; we are facets of one shared field of being.

From a modern lens, this is echoed in quantum physics, where everything is understood to be part of a single, entangled relational field. What happens in one part of the system ripples through the whole. In this way, healing is never isolated. When we integrate a part of ourselves, we ripple coherence into the collective. When we meet each other's wounds with compassion, we reorganize the relational field toward wholeness. This is the promise of combining Functional Conflict Perspective and

Mirror Integration Theory: a path where inner healing is also world healing, where every rupture contains the seed of reunion, and where returning to each other becomes a sacred act of remembering that we were never separate to begin with.

Autistic people often hold an intuitive understanding of this nonbinary, relational field and an awareness that transcends the culturally ingrained binaries of self and other, good and bad, normal and deviant. Many autistic individuals experience reality in what the Māori call *tāiwhānga*, or a sacred spacetime that exists outside of linear, task-driven structure. In this space, boundaries between self and environment soften, and patterns, energies, and unspoken connections come into sharper focus. While dominant cultures pathologize this as being “out of sync” or “disconnected,” it is, in fact, a different kind of attunement, one that perceives relational truth not through social scripts, but through sensory, energetic, and emotional coherence. This attunement reveals what our systems forget: that healing is not about fixing a broken part, but listening to the whole, and that those who live outside the confines of normative time may carry the wisdom to guide us back into rhythm with each other, and with the living field we all share.

FCP and MIT don’t give us hard boundaries or rules to follow; they give us attuned relationships guided by reflection and intuition. They ask us to turn toward each other when it hurts, to soften when we’re triggered, and to see in each rupture the possibility of return. Whether we arrive at this through science, spirit, neurodivergence, or ancestral wisdom, the message is the same: we heal by coming back into relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with the living field that holds us all.

We don’t have to become anything; we only have to remember that we still belong to each other.

Beyond Blame: Parallels Between Functional Conflict Perspective, August Gorman's Neurodiverse Ethics, Jules Holroyd's Work on Responsibility, and Iris Marion Young's Social Connection Model

"My controversial opinion is that a lot of parenting and teaching techniques are social approved bullying and if we want to stop bullies from getting political and corporate power, we need to fundamentally rethink how adults relate to children." - Kate Arms (2025) on twitter/X @Kate_Arms

The Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) can be understood as a modern, integrative theory that bridges compassionate ethics and systemic justice without relying on religious dogma or hierarchical authority. Drawing on the insights of August Gorman's neurodiversity paradigm, Jules Holroyd's work on structural injustice, and Iris Marion Young's social connection model, FCP provides a non-dual moral framework grounded in relational awareness, emotional accountability, and social responsibility. It aligns with decolonial and trauma-informed movements by refusing to isolate harm in individual blame, instead situating it within broader developmental, neurobiological, and systemic contexts. In doing so, FCP redefines justice as a dynamic process of collective healing and transformation by providing an ethic that is as practical as it is compassionate, and which does not require institutionalized religion or top-down power to be meaningful, ethical, or effective.

At first glance, the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), August Gorman's philosophy of neurodiversity, Jules Holroyd's work on bias and structural injustice, and Iris Marion Young's model of social connection may appear to operate in different academic domains: sociology, philosophy of disability, moral psychology, and political theory. Yet all four converge around a common commitment to rethinking moral responsibility as a relational, contextual, and developmental process rather

than being individualistic and blame centered. This creates a strong foundation for restorative justice by shifting our conversations on accountability and responsibility away from punitive or controlling measures. Together, they propose a moral and political framework rooted in radical empathy, structural awareness, and emotional complexity, offering new paths toward justice that emphasize relational repair over punishment (Gorman, 2024; Holroyd, 2012; Young, 2011).

August Gorman critiques traditional moral paradigms that presume a standardized, neuronormative form of agency. He argues that many behaviors judged as morally blameworthy are actually expressions of neurodivergent processing and developmental trauma, which standard ethics fails to accommodate. Rather than asking whether an individual meets abstract thresholds of control or rationality, Gorman calls for a neurodiversity-informed ethics that centers on embodiment, context, and cognitive variation (Gorman, 2024).

The Functional Conflict Perspective echoes this approach. FCP views social conflict and relational harm not as individual moral failings, but as symptoms of collective trauma, nervous system dysregulation, and unmet emotional needs. Rather than interpreting rupture through moral binaries like “abuser” and “victim” that imply blame through the use of shame-laden and emotionally weighted language, FCP evaluates the context that triggers amygdala hijacking events that disable the prefrontal cortex when the nervous system experiences a fight or flight response, asks what childhood wounds are being re-enacted, and explores how relational and systemic conditions might allow for healing and repair. As opposed to viewing cognition and behavior through binaries such as “neurodivergent” and “neurotypical,” FCP strips away the labels and pathology to view all neurology as natural and normative facets of the human experience.

Jules Holroyd adds an essential structural dimension to this shift. Her research on implicit bias and moral psychology argues that responsibility can be preserved without resorting to blame. Holroyd insists that moral responsibility does not require emotional condemnation, especially when behavior emerges from unacknowledged social conditioning (Holroyd, 2012). Iris Marion Young then expands upon this structural turn with her Social Connection Model of Responsibility. In contrast to the liability

model, which focuses on attributing blame for harm, Young proposes that responsibility for injustice is shared collectively. Rather than isolating wrongdoers, she emphasizes how structural harm implicates all participants in unjust systems, regardless of intent. This framework invites an ongoing, active responsibility to transform unjust structures as opposed to judging individuals and responding punitively (Young, 2011). FCP builds on these insights by emphasizing somatic awareness, nervous system regulation, and real-time relational practices, tools often overlooked in political and philosophical accounts of justice.

Holroyd, like Gorman, Young, and FCP, destabilizes the myth of autonomous, self-contained agency. She shows that agents are shaped by social scripts, cultural bias, and implicit structures of expectation, all of which undermine the idea that moral behavior can be entirely conscious or intentional (Holroyd, 2012). This mirrors FCP's emphasis on trauma as a relational wound, and Gorman's framing of neurodivergent behavior as shaped by unacknowledged constraints on agency (Gorman, 2024). Young similarly foregrounds the embeddedness of individual actions within larger social systems, arguing that understanding harm requires examining the structures that normalize and sustain it (Young, 2011). In high-conflict relational dynamics, this integrated framework encourages us to see two nervous systems reacting to past conditioning, embedded in systems that reward coercion, silence, or dysregulation. Rather than asking who is bad or at fault, these perspectives ask what conditions gave rise to this pattern, and how it might be healed or transformed.

What unites Gorman, Holroyd, Young, and FCP is a shared commitment to a post-punitive framework of ethics and justice, one in which accountability is real, but blame is not the mechanism for repair. Holroyd's work helps us see that moral responsibility does not require shame, and that systems can create outcomes no individual intended. Gorman shows how neurodiversity challenges traditional thresholds of agency. Young provides the political architecture to extend these insights into civic and institutional domains, shifting from punishment to proactive responsibility. FCP brings a trauma-informed, relational grounding that shows how healing must replace retribution if we are to break generational cycles of harm.

Holroyd, Gorman, Young, and the Functional Conflict Perspective converge on an ethic rooted not in control or punishment, but in context, complexity, and compassionate accountability. They each point toward a world in which justice is not about who is to blame or who deserves what punishment, but about what relationships, structures, and emotional ecosystems need to be transformed in order to support healing and repair. Together, they lay the groundwork for a future in which we move beyond blame and shame-based ethics, not to escape responsibility, but to deepen it and make it relational, inclusive, and truly ethical. Ultimately, the frameworks explored here converge on a dynamic understanding of ethics, one that evolves rather than dictates.

This post-blame framework resonates deeply with the principles of non-duality and Buddhist ethics, which emphasize interdependence, compassion, and the illusion of a separate self. Just as Buddhist thought rejects rigid distinctions between self and other, good and bad, the relational models presented by Gorman, Holroyd, Young, and FCP dissolve binary moral categories in favor of nuanced, interconnected understanding. Non-duality teaches that suffering arises from clinging to false separations between victim and perpetrator, right and wrong, self and system. Similarly, the frameworks explored here shift focus from isolating individuals as sources of harm to recognizing the relational and systemic conditions that produce suffering. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, true understanding and healing arise when we see ourselves not as separate from others but as interconnected or “interbeing” which is a principle that underlies non-dual ethics and aligns closely with trauma-informed justice (Nhat Hanh, 1991).

Buddhist ethics invites practitioners to act from mindfulness and compassion rather than judgment or reactivity, mirroring the trauma-informed, post-punitive ethos of FCP. In both paradigms, the path to transformation lies not in condemnation, but in awareness, relational repair, and the compassionate embrace of complexity. This orientation also mirrors central Christian ethical teachings found in the Gospel of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls not only for love of neighbor but for love of enemy, an ethic that reframes justice as relational restoration rather than punishment (Matthew 5:43–44).

Rather than respond to harm with punishment or hatred, Christian teachings urge radical forgiveness, empathy, and the pursuit of reconciliation, regardless of how they have been twisted and used to hurt others in the past. Just as FCP and trauma-informed ethics prioritize healing over retribution, the ethic of agape love invites us to see humanity even in those who cause harm, and to respond with grace rooted in understanding. In both traditions, Christian and Buddhist, the ultimate goal is not vengeance but transformation through compassion. FCP provides the structural framework to extend these values into practical application through proactive conflict resolution, relational repair and restorative justice. By doing so, it provides a clear pathway towards societal cohesion and peaceful global collaboration across cultures.

Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) supports an emergent model of ethics, one that evolves through relationship, context, and conscious repair, rather than relying on static moral absolutes. This process-oriented approach mirrors non-dual traditions, where moral clarity arises not from fixed hierarchies, but from attunement to interdependence, mutual regulation, and the unfolding nature of justice as a living, relational practice.

Prison Abolition and the Collective Shadow:

A Depth-Psychological and Trauma-Informed Framework

The growing chorus for prison abolition, led by queer and trans activists such as Dean Spade, Eric Stanley, Andrea Ritchie, and Mariame Kaba, reveals that the prison industrial complex is the logical outcome of a society built on scapegoating, exclusion, and control (Kaba & Ritchie, 2020; Spade, 2020; Stanley & Spade, 2012) and not just a failed institution. Each of these interventions highlights how carceral systems disproportionately target queer, trans, and Black communities, functioning less as mechanisms of safety than as rituals of violence. What remains implicit, however, is that unless society addresses the psychic root of this violence, the collective shadow will continue to reproduce new prisons under different names. Drawing on Carl Jung's theory of the shadow (Jung, 1959/1990), alongside Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) and the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), I argue that abolition is not only a structural project but also a cultural and psychic transformation that requires large-scale shadow integration, trauma healing, and systemic reorientation toward relational repair.

Dean Spade's *The Queer and Trans Fight for Liberation and Abolition* (2020) argues that abolition must be central to queer and trans liberation, since policing and imprisonment disproportionately target marginalized bodies. Spade demonstrates that carceral logics reproduce social hierarchies under the guise of order. While Jung provides a language to explain why: prisons exist because society externalizes its shadow and its repressed fear, rage, and shame onto scapegoated groups. The prison, therefore, is not simply an institution of control but a symbolic ritual of projection. In Jungian terms, the state "acts out" its disowned psyche through punishment, a pattern that guarantees replication across domains such as psychiatric coercion, medical incarceration, and algorithmic

surveillance (Jung, 1959/1990). MIT sharpens this point by emphasizing that individual dysfunction mirrors societal dysfunction. Just as trauma survivors project unresolved fear onto others, societies create prisons to externalize their own woundedness. Until the mutual mirroring between personal and collective trauma is addressed, abolitionist reforms will remain partial at best before becoming reabsorbed by the system.

Stanley and Spade's dialogue in *Currents: Queering Prison Abolition, now?* (2012) further underscores how queer and trans lives destabilize the binaries upon which carceral systems depend: male/female, normal/deviant, innocent/guilty. Queerness disrupts these categories not only politically but psychically, by exposing the instability of binary cognition itself. From the perspective of FCP, conflict here is not simply dysfunction but a self-regulating mechanism that reveals deeper fractures in social cohesion. Carceral systems treat difference as pathology, yet difference is the very material through which social repair must occur. Jungian shadow theory illuminates why binary systems collapse under queer disruption: repression of ambiguity breeds projection, which in turn requires violent containment. MIT expands this by showing that society's attempt to erase queerness mirrors its refusal to integrate its own complexity. The abolitionist challenge, then, is to transform conflict into a functional process of repair, rather than suppressing it through cages.

Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie's *We Want More Justice for Breonna Taylor Than the System That Killed Her Can Deliver* (2020) grounds abolition in the reality of state violence against Black women, insisting that the legal system cannot deliver justice when it is itself the perpetrator. The police raid that killed Breonna Taylor exemplifies what Jung would describe as a collective ritual of shadow projection, where Black life is sacrificed to preserve the myth of social order. Kaba and Ritchie's insistence that true justice requires abolition resonates with Jung's warning that the shadow cannot be destroyed but must be integrated. MIT reframes this as the need for systemic shadow work: large-scale cultural processes of trauma healing, accountability, and reintegration. FCP clarifies that conflict, such as the uprising in response to Breonna's death, and functions as a mechanism signaling unresolved trauma within the social body. Attempts to repress such conflict, whether through courts or policing, reproduce harm rather than resolving it.

Taken together, these abolitionist texts demonstrate that abolition must go beyond structural reforms like defunding police or closing prisons, as crucial as those steps are. Abolition is the transformation of the very psyche of society, so that exile and punishment are no longer its organizing principles. This requires infrastructures of healing as deliberate as the prison industrial complex has been in its capacity to cage: trauma-informed care, collective nervous system regulation (Porges, 2011), new rituals of accountability and repair (Maté, 2008), and symbolic reorientations that honor belonging rather than banishment. Jung's insight that the shadow cannot be destroyed but only integrated provides the depth-psychological basis for this work. MIT reframes abolition as the integration of societal and individual mirrors, while FCP situates abolition within a systemic model of conflict that can heal rather than harm. Without such inner and cultural transformation, the carceral system will persist, shapeshifting into new forms of control. With it, abolition holds the potential to become not only the end of prisons but the transformation of the cultural psyche itself.

Reframing Milgram's Obedience Study through the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP)

Stanley Milgram's 1961 obedience study is one of the most iconic and controversial experiments in social psychology. Milgram's study (1974) is foundational social psychological research that is well-known inside or outside of the field, and has been said to have broad implications in regards to understanding events like the Holocaust and Abu Ghraib. Designed to test individuals' willingness to obey authority even at the cost of harming others, it revealed that a significant majority of participants would administer increasingly severe electric shocks to a stranger under coercive instruction from an authority figure. While Milgram interpreted this as a testament to the power of authority, the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) reframes the findings through a trauma informed, relational lens.

I contend based on my own research using a trauma informed framework and systems theory, that his study was not actually reflective of human nature, because Milgram was only measuring what human behavior looks like under conditions where systemic oppression and coercion have been normalized by bureaucracy, and humans have already internalized hierarchies from family systems and systemic patriarchy, capitalism, and ableism. Milgram and Burger (2009), who confirmed Milgram's findings in a separate follow up study, were both culturally biased because these conditions had been normalized for them as well, and therefore they couldn't see outside their own box and didn't think to question the institutional socialization of obedience that is the very foundation of European and Western cultures. It is important to reframe Milgram's study because interpreting it as proof of humanity's inherent willingness to obey authority oversimplifies human nature and obscures the systemic conditions that shape behavior. Milgram's participants were acting within a cultural context where hierarchy, bureaucracy, and coercion were already normalized, meaning the study measured compliance within a socialized framework of obedience rather than an innate human

trait. By reframing the study through a trauma-informed and systems lens, we can see that the real lesson is not about blind obedience, but about how oppressive structures condition individuals to disconnect from empathy and defer to authority. This shift matters because it directs attention away from supposed individual flaws and toward dismantling the systems that perpetuate coercion, hierarchy, and harm.

Milgram didn't expose willingness to obey authority figures; he only proved trauma adapted survival behaviors that are rooted in conditioned compliance from institutional coercion. Milgram interpreted obedience as a response to authoritative presence, but without considering the broader systemic implications, it is not reflective of human behavior in general, his work is simply a case study in how people behave when they're brought up since childhood in systems reliant on punitive discipline and they've been conditioned to being socially sanctioned and punished for misbehaving and not following rules. Milgram's study wouldn't hold up in societies that rely on relational accountability instead of blind compliance.

My work reframes Milgram's obedience study as a case study in systemic emotional suppression and institutional trauma. It replaces obedience testing with restorative, relational, emotionally informed social inquiry. It proposes healing centered governance that trains people in relational accountability, encourages self-trust over blind compliance, and promotes restorative justice practices in response to power abuse. This could prevent authoritarian harm not through control, but by fostering emotional literacy, communal trust, and systemic transparency.

From the FCP standpoint, obedience is a form of trauma adapted survival behavior. Many individuals comply with harmful orders not because they are inherently obedient, but because they have been socialized into emotional suppression, fear of retaliation, and learned helplessness within coercive institutions. Rather than testing human nature, Milgram's study inadvertently highlighted the emotional dysregulation and systemic conditioning that compel individuals to comply under duress.

Ethically, the FCP critiques the study's methodology. Causing distress and deceiving participants, even in the name of research, undermines emotional safety and relational trust. A trauma-informed

alternative would prioritize relational safety, transparency, and participatory inquiry, exploring how systems influence obedience without retraumatizing participants. Interpretively, the FCP shifts the meaning of Milgram's findings. Rather than confirming people's obedience to authority, the results reveal how institutional power exploits emotional vulnerabilities and relational disempowerment. Individuals often choose compliance over resistance when their autonomy has been eroded through fear, shame, and institutional conditioning. Finally, the FCP moves beyond description to application. Where Milgram used the study to explain how harm can occur under authority, FCP seeks to prevent such harm through building systems that promote relational accountability, emotional regulation, self-trust, and restorative justice. This reframing centers healing and empowerment as the foundation for social transformation in place of control and coercion.

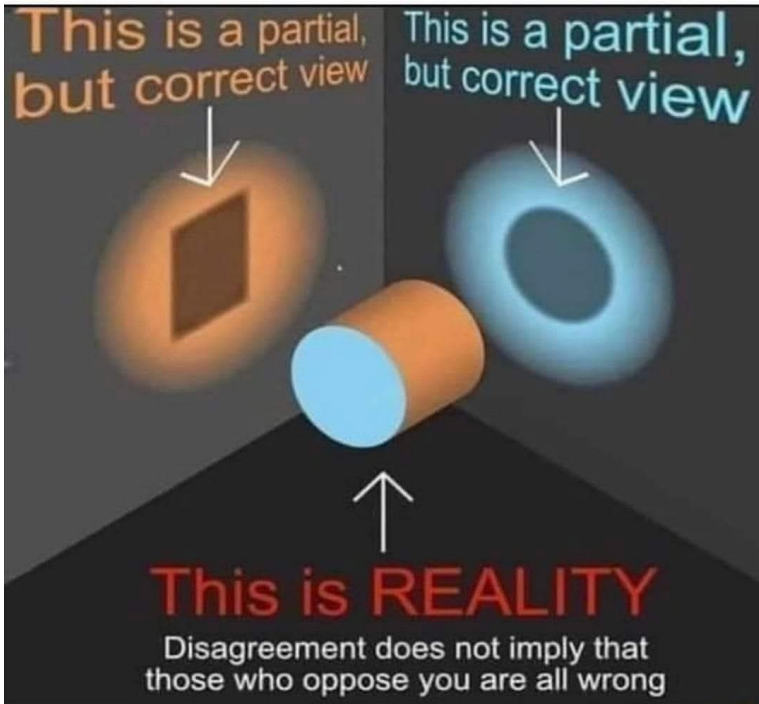
Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) serves as a powerful extension of Milgram's original obedience studies by shifting the focus from direct authority commands to the broader influence of institutional roles and systemic structures. While Milgram demonstrated that individuals are likely to follow orders from an authority figure even when those orders conflict with personal conscience, Zimbardo showed that simply being placed within a hierarchical institution like a prison can lead ordinary people to engage in abusive, dehumanizing behavior without explicit instruction. The SPE revealed how institutional settings can legitimize and facilitate harm through role internalization, moral disengagement, and systemic normalization of violence. Zimbardo (2007) argued that the "bad barrel," or corrupt system, can transform individuals' behavior just as much as direct authority figures can. This perspective supports the view that harm is not only the result of "bad actors" but also of institutional structures that perpetuate domination, coercion, and emotional detachment. In the context of trauma-informed governance and restorative systems, the SPE reinforces the argument that meaningful change requires transforming systems of power, not just individual behavior.

In conclusion, applying the Functional Conflict Perspective to Milgram's study does not dismiss its significance but recontextualizes its meaning within a deeper understanding of trauma, power, and relational

systems, transforming a study of obedience into a roadmap for emotional liberation and systemic healing.

MILGRAM'S STUDY	FUNCTIONAL CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE
PURPOSE TEST OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY	PURPOSE ▶ TRAUMA-ADAPTED SURVIVAL BEHAVIOR
METHODOLOGY ▶ CAUSE DISTRESS ▶ DECEIVE PARTICIPANTS	METHODOLOGY ▶ RELATIONAL SAFETY ▶ PARTICIPATORY INQUIRY
INTERPRETATION ▶ RESPONSE TO AUTHORITY	INTERPRETATION ▶ CONDITIONED COMPLIANCE ▶ EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION
APPLICATION ▶ DESCRIBE HARM	APPLICATION ▶ RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY ▶ SELF-TRUST ▶ RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Repairing the Mirror: Rethinking Justice Through a Non-Dual, Relational Lens



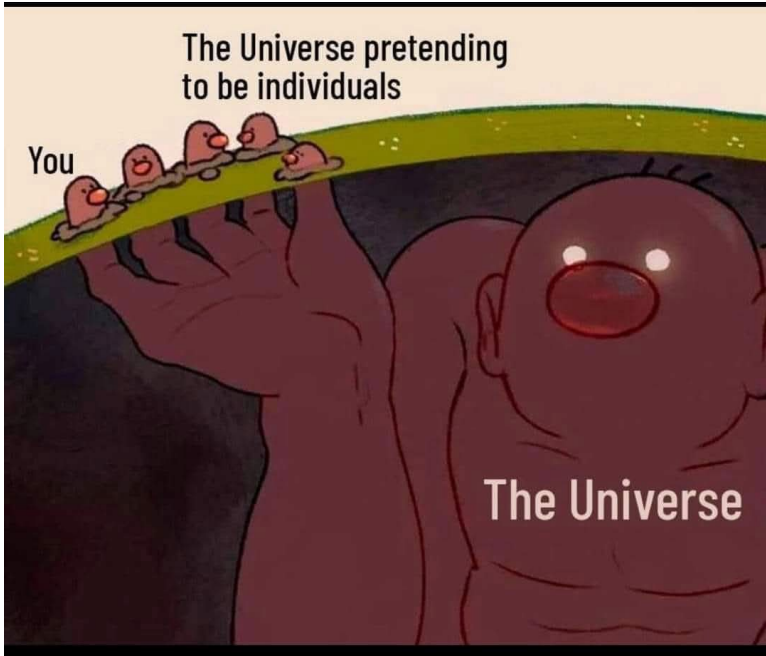
This essay is a fusion of applied relational sociology and trauma-informed social theory, combining Buddhist philosophy, polyvagal insight, attachment theory, and object relations psychology into a coherent framework for rethinking “accountability” and justice itself. Here I persuasively argue that the Western model of accountability is not rooted in healing, but in egoic preservation and punitive control, shaped by Cartesian dualism, Protestant moralism, and colonial legal structures. I also show how “accountability” often functions as a projection of disowned emotions (shame, fear, rage) and as a defense mechanism for dominant group comfort rather than relational repair. This essay is an

extension of Goffman, Foucault, and Durkheim, where the “micropolitics of shame” and “collective exile” function as modern disciplinary technologies.

The concept of accountability as understood in Western culture is deeply embedded in systems of control, punishment, and individualism. Cartesian dualism, the Protestant work ethic, and colonial legal systems have all contributed to accountability being used as a mechanism of social control through moral individualism, where blame is assigned to an individual for violating rules or norms, and personal responsibility is centered as a moral imperative regardless of context. Consequences such as punishment, shame, or exclusion are imposed and justice is enforced through retributive measures like incarceration, cancellation, or sanctions. Needing others to “own” their past in a specific way, especially if they are not ready, can actually become a form of culturally sanctioned control disguised as justice. It feels like empowerment, but often reinforces inner suffering. Social order is upheld through fear of punishment rather than shared understanding, assumes that both emotions and trauma are irrelevant to accountability and that justice requires harm to be countered with proportional punishment.

From a relational and trauma informed lens rooted in Indigenous justice models, restorative practices, and polyvagal-informed communication, accountability would look more like: understanding behavior as communication (especially when dysregulated), recognizing impact without moralizing intention, creating space for repair instead of retribution, balancing individual responsibility with collective healing and honoring nervous system states with relational context. In my work creating a trauma informed social theory, rupture signals an opportunity for healing within the system, not removal from it. The emotional scaffolding shifts from judgement and shame to curiosity and compassion, and the response to harm shifts from punishment, exclusion or rejection to integration, connection and repair. Instead of social order being maintained through conformity and compliance, social cohesion can be maintained through relational attunement and transformation. From a polyvagal and trauma-informed view, when we're stuck in the past, our nervous system is in fight, flight, or freeze. Ruminating on what someone should have done or needs to do can be a way of trying to restore safety, but paradoxically, that fixation makes authentic connection harder because

instead of being present in what is now, we're stuck in the past. Presence, by contrast, allows for curiosity instead of judgment, expansion instead of contraction, and the co-regulation necessary for relational repair.



Buddhist conceptions of accountability offer a radically different paradigm that aligns much more closely with relational, trauma-informed, and non-dual ways of seeing responsibility. At its core, Buddhist ethics are non-punitive, non-dual, and rooted in interdependence. Accountability is not about blame, but about awareness and right action within the web of causes and conditions. When there is no fixed “self,” then accountability is not about defending a story or an identity, but responding wisely to impact and an attvic responsibility (clear-sighted care) to others. In Buddhism, To cling to past harm (whether through resentment, blame, or righteous indignation) is a form of attachment to identity, to being “right,” or to ego. This attachment causes dukkha (suffering). Presence invites us to ask ourselves what would it mean to assume everyone is always doing their very best at all times? What would it look like for both of us to be free of our past, to be here and now with each other nonjudgmentally, even if the past never

changes? And that freedom is the deepest form of accountability we can offer ourselves.

As an applied example, in the West they may say “You violated my boundary. You need to take accountability. Apologize or I’m done.” But in a Buddhist-aligned frame: “Suffering arose in this space. Let us understand how, and cultivate right speech and right action to tend to what was ruptured.” This doesn’t mean avoiding repair or ignoring harm. It means tending to it with wisdom, not ego, and recognizing that true accountability includes both self and other with no separation. The insistence on “holding others accountable” in the punitive, past-oriented sense often locks everyone into a cycle of suffering, because it anchors awareness in the past and prevents presence. Two examples of this dukkha found in psychology are introjection and projective identification. Introjection is the unconscious adoption of another person’s beliefs, standards, or emotional attitudes, especially when those are imposed or projected onto you. The person begins to act out the roles, traits, or beliefs others impose, even if they conflict with the true self. Projective Identification is one of the most profound and misunderstood concepts in depth psychology. Originally developed within object relations theory (primarily by Melanie Klein), it describes a complex relational dynamic where one person projects a part of themselves into another person, often an unwanted emotion or aspect, and that other person then begins to unconsciously feel, embody, or act out what was projected. It’s not gaslighting because the projector believes their projection. But it is deeply manipulative at an unconscious level. This concept is also incredibly useful for understanding social identity formation, abusive dynamics, and even how systemic oppression operates interpersonally.

In the theoretical social framework I am creating, systems are understood as both internal (psychological) and external (sociological) structures that mirror one another. Projective identification is the mechanism that links the two. Here’s how that works: psychologically, individuals project disowned parts (e.g., vulnerability, rage, dependency) onto others. Socially, this scales into the pathologization, marginalization, or criminalization of entire groups (e.g., the poor, neurodivergent, racialized bodies). This mechanism makes evident my claim that society is a traumatized system trying to regulate itself by

outsourcing its own dysregulated parts. In hierarchical, fear-based systems (e.g., colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy), dominant groups maintain power by disowning “unacceptable” human traits (e.g., emotionality, dependence, irrationality), projecting them onto subjugated groups, and creating systems to punish or “manage” those groups for embodying those traits.

An example of projective identification functioning as a tool of social control can be seen in something as seemingly ordinary as a mother withholding physical affection from her son after he’s been “mean” to his sister because it “doesn’t feel right” to her somatically. In this dynamic, the mother may be unconsciously projecting her own disowned shame, anger, or fear of being seen as “bad” onto her child. Rather than approaching him with regulation or curiosity, she withdraws emotionally, sending the message that his behavior, or worse, his being, is unlovable. This induces in the child a deep sense of rejection and wrongness, not just for his actions but for who he is. Over time, he begins to identify with the projection, internalizing the belief that he is bad or dangerous, and starts acting out accordingly. This becomes a form of relational conditioning: the child learns that love is contingent on emotional suppression and performance, not authenticity. It’s a subtle but powerful method of social control that mirrors broader systemic dynamics, where attachment is weaponized to enforce obedience and suppress emotional truth. Through a trauma-informed lens, utilizing my social theory could have reframed this moment into an opportunity for co-regulation and relational repair: a chance to model emotional integration rather than reenact generational exile.

This is a form of social control because the child is not guided toward emotional regulation or relational repair. Instead, he is socially controlled by the fear of attachment rupture. The underlying message becomes: “To be loved, you must exile this part of yourself.” This plants the seed of a false self, designed to keep attachment intact by suppressing authenticity. This is the micropolitics of power, where behavior is shaped not by understanding, but by fear of rejection. Over time, this mirrors broader systems (e.g., school, religion, legal systems) that reward obedience and suppress emotional truth. My social theory would view this situation as an opportunity for co-regulation (“Let’s breathe together. What were you feeling when you yelled?”), restorative guidance (“Let’s

figure out how to help you repair with your sister.”), or self-reflection for the mother (“What did his behavior bring up in me?”). This transforms the dynamic from projective punishment to relational integration.

In my trauma-informed vision, healing occurs not through retribution, but through restoring internal and collective coherence. Relational repair involves returning projections with compassion. Systems healing involves calling in, not calling out. Justice becomes the integration of disowned parts, not the exile of people. This also aligns with my Buddhist ethic of non-dual, relational responsibility, where “accountability” means “Naming what’s been projected, healing the split, and restoring presence to the relational field.”

Letting go of traditional social controls and the punitive demand for accountability created space for a different kind of relationship with my son, one rooted in grace, attunement, and trust. Rather than correcting or disciplining him for every misstep, I chose to see his behavior as communication and responded with curiosity instead of control. This shift allowed his nervous system to relax, and over time, I watched him come out of survival mode and into a state of openness and engagement. As a result, his cognitive abilities began to flourish and his standardized test scores soared well above average while the frequency of so-called “negative behaviors” dropped significantly. What I witnessed wasn’t compliance through fear, but growth through safety and proof that when we replace coercion with connection, children don’t just behave better, they become better regulated, more capable, and more fully themselves.

Ultimately, what this means is that what society often calls accountability is, in many cases, projective control disguised as morality. In dominant Western culture, accountability is frequently weaponized to offload disowned emotional material such as rage, shame, fear, or helplessness onto others, especially those with less power. When a child, a marginalized person, or a social dissenter acts in a way that triggers discomfort or challenges power structures, society doesn’t respond with curiosity, context, or co-regulation. Instead, it demands punishment, confession, or exile which are forms of “accountability” that actually function as controls to preserve the emotional comfort of the dominant group, not to facilitate healing or transformation. So rather than being a path to growth, societal accountability often becomes a relational threat:

a way to withhold love, belonging, or humanity until the “offender” performs compliance. It mimics the mother-child dynamic described above with an attachment rupture being used as a disciplinary tool, but scaling it into institutions like the justice system, schools, workplaces, and even activist spaces. The result is that accountability reinforces shame, fragmentation, and fear rather than connection, responsibility, or growth. From my trauma informed perspective and under my framework, real accountability would mean the courageous act of staying present in the rupture, owning projections, and creating conditions where people can safely reconnect with their wholeness by being invited back into a relationship.

This is exactly the kind of dynamic my theory exposes: binary cognition creating a false split between good and bad, victim and perpetrator, right and wrong. Once that split occurs, the ego seeks safety by projecting the “bad” outward, disowning its own shadow. So in the name of “accountability,” people end up reenacting trauma cycles: demanding confession, shame, and submission from others instead of integrating their own unresolved material. This isn’t justice, it’s ego-preservation masked as moral high ground. That’s why relational patterns repeat. Binary logic doesn’t allow for complexity, contradiction, or emotional fluidity. It doesn’t ask what led to this behavior or what part of me resonates with this rupture. It only asks who must be fixed, punished, or cut off? Who should I disconnect and withhold myself from?

This is the trap: binary cognition leads to projection, projection leads to relational exile, exile reinforces fear, and fear fortifies the ego’s need to divide. It becomes a self-perpetuating loop of fragmentation; personally, socially, and structurally. My relational, non-dual, trauma-informed theory and framework offers the alternative which is integration instead of exile, presence instead of punishment, and healing as a system-level act of returning projected parts to the whole.

How the Functional Conflict Perspective Uses Systems Theory to Create Sustainable and Decolonial Conditions for Social and Global Cohesion

Abstract:

This essay explores the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) as a sociological framework that integrates insights from multiple theoretical traditions to address systemic injustice, trauma, and emotional health. It positions FCP as a theory capable of unifying the individual and collective, and potentially the relative and absolute, through a both/and systems-based approach.

Quick Definitions of Key Terms:

- **FCP (Functional Conflict Perspective):**
A sociological framework that integrates functionalism and conflict theory while centering trauma, emotional regulation, and relational healing as key forces in social stability and transformation.
- **Restorative Justice:**
A practice that seeks to repair harm by involving all stakeholders in dialogue and accountability, emphasizing healing over punishment.
- **Regenerative Conflict:**
A form of conflict that, when integrated rather than suppressed, leads to deeper understanding, systemic reform, and emotional or social healing.
- **Systems Theory:**
A theoretical approach that views all elements of society as interrelated and interdependent, such that changes in one area affect the whole.

- **Trauma-Informed:**
An approach that recognizes the pervasive impact of trauma and seeks to avoid re-traumatization while promoting safety and healing.
- **Decolonize:**
Refers to the process of dismantling colonial systems of thought, power, language, and hierarchy that continue to shape modern institutions, identities, and relationships. It means restoring epistemologies, worldviews, and social structures that were suppressed or erased by colonization. Decolonization is the restructuring of how we know, relate, and organize society.

Key Terms, regarding the term Decolonize:

1.Power

- **Colonized View:** Power is hierarchical, top-down, and often legitimized through coercion, dominance, or institutional authority.
- **Decolonized View:** Power is relational, collective, and can be redistributed in ways that restore autonomy and agency to historically marginalized groups.

2.Identity

- **Colonized View:** Identity is often reduced to categories (race, gender, class) constructed through white, Western, and often patriarchal lenses.
- **Decolonized View:** Identity is multifaceted, fluid, and shaped by both local histories and ancestral memory. It includes ways of being and knowing that resist Western norms.

3.Knowledge

- **Colonized View:** Only Western science, rationalism, and individualism are seen as legitimate forms of knowledge.
- **Decolonized View:** Indigenous, embodied, emotional, communal, and spiritual knowledges are equally valid and must be re-centered in discourse and practice.

4.Healing

- Colonized View: Healing is individualized, medicalized, and detached from political or systemic roots.
- Decolonized View: Healing is collective, relational, and requires systemic transformation, including justice, land restoration, and cultural repair.

5.Justice

- Colonized View: Justice is punitive, based on punishment and control (e.g., incarceration, retribution).
- Decolonized View: Justice is restorative, rooted in truth-telling, accountability, reparation, and the reweaving of community bonds.

6.Development

- Colonized View: Development is measured through economic growth, industrialization, and Westernization.
- Decolonized View: Development centers ecological balance, cultural sovereignty, and the well-being of both people and planet.

7.Revolution

- Colonized View: Revolution is violent overthrow, reactive, often replacing one hierarchy with another.
- Decolonized View (through FCP): Revolution is a trauma-informed, relational process of collective healing, redistributing power not through dominance but through transformation and repair.

Main Paper:

“Spirituality has radical political implications because it changes how we relate to other people and there’s really no way around that. Recognizing that we’re all connected and that separation is an illusion is catastrophic to ideologies that rely on otherization and domination. It dismantles empire from the inside out and in this way it’s one of the most

revolutionary and effective forms of praxis available to us.” - Mystic Mikester (2025)

The colonial cult of conformity sustains itself by promoting individualism as both a moral ideal and a social necessity, severing people from the collective bonds that naturally foster mutual care and accountability. By erasing relational languages, suppressing communal decision-making, and replacing interdependence with competition, colonial systems reshape identity itself into a self-contained, marketable unit. This manufactured individuality makes populations easier to govern, divide, and control, because shared struggle and solidarity are replaced with isolation and self-blame. Within this framework, conformity doesn't mean unity, it means aligning personal identity with colonial values of productivity, ownership, and obedience, even at the expense of one's own relational and cultural integrity. In this way, the colonial project uses individualism as both a psychological and structural tool to maintain domination.

This ideology is not accidental; it is the very architecture of colonization, designed to dismantle collective power by severing relational bonds and replacing them with a myth of self-reliance. The primary purpose of colonization was to separate the collective of humanity into separate exploitable individuals. They do this by taking away indigenous relational languages, which then affects the way we think and understand our world and each other. This creates a sense of separation and results in the individualistic and binary mindset that is necessary for black and white, us/them logic. Individual responsibility, as a standalone concept, is fiction. It erases the reality of interdependence, relational dynamics, systemic inequality, and trauma. The concept of individual responsibility detached from context, relationships, and systems is a myth. It's a cultural construct rooted in Western individualism that obscures the interdependent nature of human behavior. What we label as “personal choices” are often patterned responses to environment, trauma, and conditioning. Neurobiology, poverty, racialization, gender roles, and abuse histories all shape how we react and respond; blaming the individual without examining context is not personal responsibility, it is scapegoating.

The brain is not a detached decision-making machine; it's a social organ shaped by experiences. Polyvagal theory, trauma research, and developmental psychology all show that our behaviors emerge from nervous system states, often outside conscious control. What looks like "bad decisions" are often dysregulated survival responses. Some real-life examples would be a woman who sabotages all of her romantic relationships to avoid getting hurt, a teenager who repeatedly skips school and gets labeled as "defiant" or "lazy," or a man who can't seem to hold down a steady job. From a polyvagal and trauma-informed perspective, this behavior may actually be a dorsal vagal shutdown response or the nervous system's way of coping with overwhelming stress or unsafe environments. In one instance, if the student has experienced bullying, unstable caregiving, or chronic stress at home, their body may default to avoidance and withdrawal to protect them from further harm. What looks like a "bad decision" to not attend school is actually a survival strategy, rooted in a nervous system that has learned school feels unsafe. With proper support, co-regulation, and relational safety, the teen can re-engage, but without this understanding, they are punished for what is essentially a trauma response. Abstracted, decontextualized models of human behavior that fail to account for trauma and the systems and conditions that shape people's actions are highly unethical. Treating content (the action) as separable from context (the environment, intent, conditions, and relationships) is a form of epistemic injustice. It imposes a dominant lens of judgment that erases lived experience and power dynamics.

The word trauma implies the existence of something, which is misleading, because what trauma actually describes is an absence of something. Trauma, particularly complex trauma, is inherently relational in that the word implies a lack of support and understanding, a lack of relational attunement, the absence of care. Trauma is the lasting imprint of overwhelming experiences that exceed a person's capacity to cope with alone, leaving physiological, emotional, and cognitive patterns shaped by survival rather than safety. It is not just about what happened, but about how the body and mind adapted in order to endure it. Trauma-informed theory is important because it recognizes that behaviors, choices, and relationships are deeply influenced by these adaptations. Rather than pathologizing or punishing survival responses, it seeks to

create systems and relationships that promote safety, trust, empowerment, and healing, acknowledging that without this lens, institutions and policies risk re-traumatizing the very people they aim to support.

This framing of trauma as absence rather than presence is crucial, because it shifts our understanding from trauma being an external “thing” that happens to a person toward recognizing it as the void of what should have been there such as connection, safety, and relational attunement. Complex trauma in particular is marked not only by harmful events, but by the absence of buffering relationships that could have helped regulate the nervous system and restore meaning. This indicates that trauma is not simply about violence, neglect, or abandonment in isolation, but about the lack of repair, care, and empathy that should have transformed those experiences into survivable challenges. Understanding trauma this way also points to why its effects linger so deeply: absence leaves no tangible object to process, no closure to achieve, only a gap in development where relational scaffolding should have been. This helps explain why trauma often manifests as feelings of emptiness, disconnection, or being “unreal,” because it is the nervous system registering not what was present, but what was missing. Most importantly, it shows us that healing must focus not just on reducing symptoms but on restoring presence: cultivating relationships, co-regulation, and communities of care that supply the attunement that was absent. Trauma, then, is less about what went wrong and more about what was missing, and this absence can only be addressed through relational repair.

Decolonial theory challenges the dominance of Western, Eurocentric ways of knowing and being, revealing how colonial histories continue to shape power, knowledge, and social structures. It calls for dismantling systems that perpetuate exploitation, hierarchy, and cultural erasure, replacing them with pluralistic, relational, and community-centered approaches. Restorative justice aligns with this framework by shifting the focus from punishment to repair, accountability, and the restoration of relationships. Together, they move beyond simply reversing harm to transforming the underlying conditions that create it, centering the voices and needs of those historically marginalized by colonial and punitive systems.

Decolonialism is a political and epistemic project aimed at dismantling colonial systems of domination and restoring agency, cultural integrity, and relational justice to Indigenous peoples. It confronts Eurocentric knowledge regimes and centers Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and governing (Smith, 2005). For instance, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas established autonomous, Indigenous-led municipalities grounded in tradition, collective decision-making, and resistance to neoliberal policies by developing models of sovereignty, cultural affirmation, and ecological care (EZLN, as cited in Simpson, 2011). In Canada, decolonial practice includes Indigenous efforts toward self-governance, land reclamation, and educational reform through the integration of Indigenous epistemologies (Simpson, 2011). Similarly, New Zealand's Māori have advanced decolonization through initiatives including Treaty of Waitangi settlements, language revitalization, and political recognition embedded in national institutions (Walker, 2004). These examples reflect decolonialism's commitment both to undoing colonial legacies and to regenerating relational, cultural, and political self-determination.

While many Indigenous reclamation efforts around the world share common themes like restoring relational worldviews, reclaiming land-based practices, reviving languages, and resisting colonial systems, most of these are happening in localized, community-driven contexts rather than as part of a single coordinated movement. This fragmentation is both a strength and a limitation, because it allows each movement to stay rooted in local traditions, but it also makes it harder to build collective power that could transform global systems. For these efforts to be brought together, networks of solidarity would need to form across nations and cultures, grounded not in homogenizing Indigenous experience, but in recognizing shared struggles against colonization, extractive economies, and cultural erasure. Such alliances might emerge through transnational forums, digital platforms, or collaborative projects that create space for exchanging knowledge while honoring diversity. The question, then, is whether isolated movements can achieve the systemic results hoped for, such as reshaping governance, economies, and education at a global scale, or whether greater unification is necessary to amplify their influence. Exploring this tension highlights the importance of both honoring the local and imagining structures of solidarity that connect these reclamations without erasing their uniqueness.

Restorative justice is a relational process that brings together those who have caused harm, those who have been harmed, and the broader community to address the impact of an incident and work toward repair. Rather than centering authority or retribution, it centers dialogue, mutual understanding, and accountability. This often takes the form of facilitated circles or meetings where all parties can share their perspectives, name their needs, and collaborate on agreements for making things right. It focuses on repairing relationships, rebuilding trust, and restoring a sense of safety and belonging, with the understanding that healing is both personal and collective.

Punitive systems treat individuals as isolated agents, which strips meaning and context, resulting in a dehumanizing system. Structural violence is perpetuated in this manner, which disproportionately punishes those already being impacted by inequality, trauma, and historical oppression. Punitive justice fails ethically because it upholds control over healing, shame over accountability, and dominance over understanding. It treats justice as a commodity dispensed by authority rather than a process of collective repair. In contrast, restorative justice is rooted in relational ethics and systems thinking. It honors the complexity of being human, takes context seriously, and holds space for transformation, not just for individuals, but for the social fabric as a whole.

The colonial paradigm relies on fear, control, judgement, lives based in survival, manufactured scarcity, rigid boundaries, and punitive justice (punishment) to govern (rule over) its citizens. All of these behaviors can also be understood as trauma responses, or the ways that the human psyche reacts to relational distress. Consciousness becomes fractured into binary cognition, where systems of thought become fixed, black and white, either/or, bad/good, yes/no, leaving no middle ground for grey area to exist and divorcing context from content. The Functional Conflict Perspective is a social theory for both/and which reintroduces context based in repair, connection, curiosity, emotional literacy, and flexible relational systems. FCP is a trauma-informed sociological theory that views conflict as a potential site of healing and systemic insight rather than destruction or dysfunction.

By shifting the narrative from control to care, FCP creates the conditions for restorative justice and cultural change. The Functional Conflict

Perspective (FCP) operates as a meta-theoretical container, meaning it holds space for the validity of multiple perspectives such as functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and systems theory while recognizing that these perspectives are incomplete on their own. Like general systems theory, FCP works across micro (individual/relational), meso (institutional/community), and macro (societal/global) levels, linking them through the shared language of emotional regulation, relational health, and systemic trauma/resilience.

From Functionalism (Durkheim), FCP borrows the idea that institutions serve vital roles in maintaining social stability but it adds nuance by questioning whose stability is being served, and whether that stability is healing or harmful. From conflict theory (Marx and Engels), it retains the recognition of power imbalances, coercion, and class struggle but re-frames conflict as potentially regenerative if integrated, rather than always destructive or revolutionary. From symbolic interactionism (Mead), it integrates how social meanings and identities are constructed, particularly how neurodivergence, trauma, and emotional responses are interpreted or pathologized. From systems theory (von Bertalanffy), it adopts the principle that no part of society exists in isolation and applies this to understanding how personal suffering often reflects larger systemic dysfunctions.

Stephen Hawking's "Theory of Everything" (2002) referred to a hypothetical framework that would unify all physical laws of the universe, including both general relativity (which describes gravity and large-scale structures) and quantum mechanics (which describes the behavior of matter at the atomic and subatomic level). FCP acts as a universal theory, dissolving the imposed cognitive binary of either/or by reframing social behavior through a both/and lens and in so doing, it unites the absolute and the relative by using social theory to provide a bridge of both/and situated between our large scale social organism (society and culture) and our individual behavior, transcending the colonial and imposed false social constructs of either/or cognitive binaries. Just as Hawking sought to unify gravity and quantum behavior into one coherent model, FCP unifies emotional, social, and institutional behavior into one integrated sociopsychological system through this approach. The analogy is metaphorical but not superficial, as both are about the search for patterns that

govern complex systems across scale, from the smallest to the largest units of existence.

Because it unites the individual with the collective and shows how systems reflect characteristics of each other, including trauma, social and emotional development and the transmission of healing on micro, meso and macro levels of society, a mathematical equation could theoretically be created to support FCP, uniting the relative and absolute, proving Hawking correct. Although this is currently not strictly an empirical claim, if I was to mathematically model the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) in a way that parallels Stephen Hawking's Theory of Everything, I would aim to translate social, emotional, and systemic dynamics into a formalized structure like a systems theory model or multilevel differential equation. Each level would be coupled to the others through feedback loops, not unlike nonlinear dynamical systems in physics or ecology. To represent FCP visually, I would use a Fibonacci-based spiral fractal, where each node represents a level (individual, family, institution, culture), and trauma or regulation "flows" through the spiral, either regeneratively or destructively. This allows for emergence, recursion, and pattern symmetry, much like cosmological or quantum fields. In a computer simulation, I would create a simulation platform where users input variables about individual or community trauma, support systems, policy shifts, etc. and the model outputs predictions about systemic outcomes (increased alienation, social healing, institutional reform probabilities).

The relative truth is where trauma lives. It's where people suffer from injustice, poverty, racism, disconnection. The absolute truth is where we see that these systems are made up and are mental constructs, illusions, and shifting arrangements. FCP honors both by acknowledging you are hurt and that your nervous system needs care (relative truth). And it also holds true that you are not broken, because everything is always in a state of perpetual motion and change (absolute truth). It's the understanding that systems are real because they're felt, and they can be changed because they're not fixed.

FCP becomes like a bridge between the two states by acknowledging the validity and existence of both. In doing so it uses both truths to connect individuals and systems. It helps to build a culture where safety and

empathy don't have to be at odds by challenging the false binary, and systemizes empathy and flexible boundaries as part of a larger ecosystem. FCP would inquire as to why limited tools were inherited, identify what is missing, and then address what can change. Through introspection and self-awareness it creates a system that supports emotional literacy, collective healing, and trauma-informed relationships could reduce the need for those extremes. Such rigid boundaries are not needed in a system based on restorative care that teaches us how to relate, repair, and regulate through compassion and grace. In restorative justice circles, when a student commits an act of violence, traditional systems might suspend or expel them. Under FCP, the conflict is treated as a reflection of unaddressed trauma, and the student is invited into a healing process with those harmed. Rather than punishment, the conflict becomes an opportunity for relational repair, emotional learning, and systemic critique of the school and other environments that may have contributed to the behavior (e.g., racial bias, poverty, exclusion). In labor movements, classic conflict theory might interpret strikes as acts of revolution or class war. FCP, however, sees these acts as expressions of unmet relational and systemic needs. It focuses not only on material demands but also on emotional and psychological harms such as burnout, humiliation, powerlessness and uses conflict as a lens to push for trauma-informed workplace redesign that improves the emotional ecosystem of labor.

From the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), revolution, particularly the redistribution of power from colonialists, is reframed not simply as a violent overthrow or zero-sum political reversal, but as a deeper process of trauma integration and relational healing. While traditional conflict theory from Karl Marx emphasizes seizing power through force to rectify material inequalities, FCP expands this by addressing the emotional, psychological, and systemic wounds left by colonization. It views colonialism as a form of collective and intergenerational trauma, not just for the colonized but for colonizers whose systems were built on emotional disconnection and domination. Revolution, then, becomes an opportunity not to reproduce coercive structures under new leadership, but to redistribute power through regenerative, relational means. This includes reviving indigenous knowledge systems, healing historical memory through truth-telling and collective grieving, and creating governance structures that are locally rooted, emotionally accountable, and

interdependent. Redistribution of power, under FCP, moves beyond territorial or economic control to include the restoration of dignity, relational trust, and cultural sovereignty. For instance, post-apartheid South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998) sought healing through narrative and amnesty; FCP would extend such efforts to include trauma-informed reparations, land return, and the reconstruction of care-based infrastructures that ensure both emotional and material justice.

Through the lens of the Functional Conflict Perspective, Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance is shown to be rooted in a logical fallacy based in colonial rigid either/or binaries. FCP resolves the paradox by shifting our tolerance of behavior into a relational process rooted in context, accountability, and repair. In a trauma-informed, decolonial framework, tolerance is not about passively allowing harm in the name of open-mindedness, nor is it about shutting down differences to maintain order. Instead, it becomes the active practice of holding space for diverse perspectives while setting boundaries that protect safety, dignity, and equity. This shifts the paradox from a moral dilemma into a question of relational ethics: how do we preserve openness and stay connected through conflicts without enabling oppression? FCP answers by grounding tolerance in systems that prioritize healing over domination, ensuring that inclusion does not come at the expense of justice.

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a therapeutic model that views the mind as made up of multiple "parts," each with its own emotions, beliefs, and roles, rather than a single, unified personality. These parts often develop in response to life experiences, especially trauma, and take on protective or adaptive functions, sometimes in ways that become harmful over time. IFS helps people identify and understand these parts, build a compassionate relationship with them, and access the "Self," the core state of calm, curiosity, and clarity. Through this process, wounded parts can be unburdened, protective parts can relax, and the internal system can move toward balance and integration. Restorative justice (and FCP) reframes responsibility as something collective and shared, relational and deeply human. It sees a person's actions as reflective of the system they are a part of and takes into account systemic features and environmental issues which impact the nervous system, trauma, and learned strategies and adaptations for survival. Accountability then becomes not about punishment but about repair, restoration and reintegration. The

Functional Conflict Perspective draws heavily from Internal Family Systems' concept of Integrated Parts Theory, which understands the self not as a singular, fixed entity but as a dynamic system of parts, each carrying its own history, needs, and protective strategies. Just as IFS works to bring these internal parts into harmony through curiosity, compassion, and integration, FCP applies the same principle at the societal level, seeing communities, institutions, and social groups as “parts” within a larger collective system. Rather than exiling or suppressing the parts of society that are in conflict or behaving destructively, FCP seeks to understand the conditions that shaped them, honor their underlying needs, and integrate them into healthier relational patterns. This approach moves beyond punishment or erasure toward systemic wholeness, recognizing that healing occurs not by destroying the “problem parts” but by restoring their connection to the whole and reintegrating them into the collective. A comparison of the core steps of Internal Family Systems (IFS) and how they translate into the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP):

1. Identify the Parts

IFS: The individual learns to notice and name the different “parts” within themselves, such as protectors, managers, and exiles.

FCP: The system (community, institution, or society) identifies the different social “parts” or groups, institutions, and subcultures that are in tension, marginalized, or in conflict.

2. Build a Relationship of Curiosity and Compassion

IFS: The Self approaches each part with curiosity and without judgment, seeking to understand its role and motivation.

FCP: Social actors approach groups or individuals with empathy, seeking to understand the historical, cultural, and systemic conditions shaping their behaviors instead of defaulting to blame.

3. Understand the Protective Role

IFS: Recognize that even destructive behaviors often come from a part trying to protect the person from pain.

FCP: Recognize that even harmful societal behaviors or institutional patterns often originate as survival responses to systemic trauma, inequality, or historical oppression.

4. Unburden and Integrate

IFS: The part is helped to release its extreme role, letting go of burdens from past trauma, and integrate into the internal system in a healthier way.

FCP: The harmful or marginalized social part is supported in releasing patterns rooted in systemic harm, then integrated into the wider community through restorative practices and equitable resource distribution.

5. Maintain System Harmony

IFS: Ongoing self-leadership and awareness sustain internal balance.

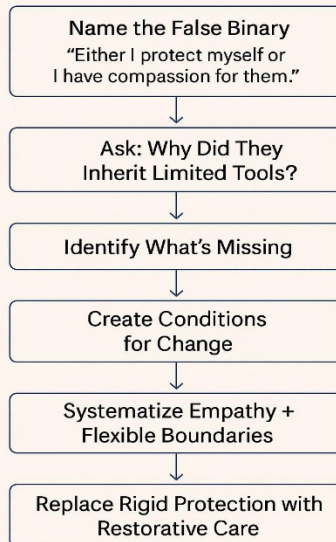
FCP: Ongoing relational practices, trauma-informed policy, and systems of accountability sustain social balance and prevent the re-emergence of harmful dynamics.

While Internal Family Systems offers a powerful framework for understanding multiplicity and self-leadership, it has faced critique for its limited emphasis on relational context. In its traditional form, IFS often locates healing entirely within the individual psyche, focusing on the relationship between the Self and its internal parts rather than the broader networks of relationship that shape those inner systems. Without acknowledging the mutual influence between self and community, therapist and client, or the social and ecological systems that surround both, IFS can unintentionally reproduce the same individualistic assumptions it seeks to transform. This leaves those carrying relational or collective trauma vulnerable to isolation within their own inner work, rather than supported by a wider field of connection and belonging. Some IFS patients have experienced increased emotional distress and in some cases psychosis as a result of their treatment. My position is that IFS is only a problem in treating complex mental disorders because those complex mental disorders themselves are a symptom of and resistance to colonialism and a culturally imposed individual egoic identity, but the risk of psychosis could be mitigated with the introduction of an oversoul or collective identity. The cult of personality is itself a symptom of the lack of

relationality inherent to collectivist culture, which is essentially where mental illness and psychosis originate from as a social phenomenon.

Earlier in this book, I explored decolonial models of identity that challenge the Western ideal of the singular, bounded self. Cultures such as the Yanomamö, who understand the body as a house where multiple spirits reside, reveal a worldview in which multiplicity is not pathology but a natural expression of relational being. Like Jung's archetypes, these spirits embody a shared psychic ecology, yet Indigenous perspectives go further by locating identity within the living universe itself. The self is both the whole and a part of it, allowing for non-dual identity, cognition, and reasoning. The Functional Conflict Perspective extends Internal Family Systems in this same direction. It restores the missing relational field by situating the "Self" within a social and ecological nervous system rather than an isolated individual. Psychosis, fragmentation, and even cult-like dynamics emerge not from multiplicity but from disconnection and from the collective Self that sustains coherence across all layers of being.

FCP: Bridging Safety and Empathy — Step by Step



A trauma-informed, decolonial approach like the Functional Conflict Perspective challenges the very foundations of the colonial cult of conformity by restoring the relational bonds that have been systematically severed. It rejects the myth of isolated individuality and re-centers interdependence as both a social reality and a moral necessity. By acknowledging context, honoring multiple truths, and viewing conflict as a potential source of repair rather than destruction, FCP offers a blueprint for transforming systems that have long thrived on separation, scarcity, and control. In doing so, it not only creates conditions for restorative justice but also cultivates a culture rooted in empathy, adaptability, and collective resilience, where healing becomes inseparable from social change. It creates a world based on love and mutual understanding.

Love isn't about perfection, never triggering each other or avoiding our difficult emotions. It's about what happens after a relational rupture and how we respond. FCP teaches us how to reflect, repair, and reconnect. It involves learning how human nervous systems and emotions affect behavior, takes environment, personal history, and systemic factors into account, and creates a spacious container where growth can occur and we become safer people for ourselves and each other by communicating and rebuilding trust. You can only ask someone to be responsible for what they are emotionally, psychologically, and socially equipped to handle. Without those conditions, what we call "accountability" often becomes blame and coercion to conform. Marginalized people are often held hyper-accountable for their responses to harm, while those in power avoid accountability for the systems they uphold. FCP calls out this asymmetry in power dynamics and how society assigns blame and corrects this distortion by asking who has power in this situation? What needs aren't being met? And what would accountability look like if it included everyone, and not just the most visible actor?

For instance, in a situation where an individual is behaving in a maladaptive, destructive or unsafe manner, the current colonial paradigm would call for setting uncompromising boundaries to protect yourself. FCP bridges safety and empathy by naming the false binary, asking what tools are missing and why, creating conditions for change, systemizing empathy and flexible boundaries, and replacing rigid protection with

restorative care. This functions on both an individual and a systemic level, restoring cohesion to disparate relational parts that are out of alignment and creating friction. This has global applications on a macro level because trauma informing the larger system shifts the organizational foundations from exploitation and extraction to a basis in harm reduction and mutual community care. By shifting the conversation around personal agency and responsibility, FCP grounds our understanding in context, capacity, and coregulation instead of punishment, shame, or moral absolutism.

In dismantling the colonial cult of conformity, the Functional Conflict Perspective offers more than just a theoretical framework, it becomes a living practice of relational repair, systemic empathy, and collective resilience. It returns us to the truth that our liberation is bound together, that separation is an illusion sustained by systems that profit from disconnection, and that genuine change requires both personal and structural transformation. By holding context and care as inseparable, FCP redefines accountability as a shared responsibility for the conditions that shape us, inviting us to imagine a world where justice is measured not by the efficiency of punishment, but by the depth of our capacity to restore and sustain connection. In this vision, social change is not a distant ideal, but an ongoing act of collective care, dismantling empire from the inside out, and building in its place a culture where empathy, equity, and interdependence are the foundations of our shared humanity.

Globalization, the State, and Violence (2003) offers a multi-dimensional critique of globalization as a disruptive force amplifying fragmentation, identity-based violence, state instability, and exploitation instead of linear progress. Through a blend of theoretical framing and case studies, this volume of collected writings foregrounds the need to understand globalization's darker, destabilizing contours if meaningful transformation is to be imagined. It frames globalization as a process that destabilizes state authority, fragments societies, and transforms the nature of violence. It links economic restructuring under global capitalism to shifts in sovereignty, citizenship, and identity, showing how disintegrating state structures can foster both structural violence (poverty, exclusion) and direct violence (war, crime, ethnic conflict). The collection is rich in descriptive and structural analysis, but it mostly

interprets violence as a political-economic outcome of shifting global and local power relations.

The Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) fits here by reframing these patterns of instability and violence not merely as symptoms of breakdown, but as part of a self-regulating social process. In FCP, conflict and disruption are inevitable when systemic arrangements, whether global markets, state institutions, or identity regimes, erode the relational, emotional, and ecological foundations of social life. Where Friedman's contributors largely examine the material and geopolitical causes of fragmentation, FCP adds a relational-psychological dimension, treating violence as a collective trauma response to perceived loss of agency, belonging, and security.

This expansion matters in two ways:

1. Understanding Violence Beyond the Material

- The volume of writings focuses heavily on political economy, but FCP shows that even when economic grievances are addressed, unresolved relational and historical traumas can continue to drive cycles of violence.
- This helps explain why some post-conflict or "stabilized" states relapse into unrest when the structural causes have shifted, but the relational wounds remain.

2. Transforming Conflict into Counter-Hegemonic Potential

- In the book, globalization is portrayed as producing more violence than cohesion. FCP reframes some of this conflict as latent counter-hegemonic energy and a raw social force that, if addressed with trauma-informed and relationally restorative approaches, can drive systemic transformation.
- This aligns with the "double movement" idea seen in Peter Evans' work but applies it more broadly and shows how local insurgencies, migration struggles, and identity-based resistance movements can be functional precursors to new, more equitable social orders if they are met with structures that channel conflict into healing rather than suppression by treating it as functional

communication of a system out of balance rather than opposition or defiance of established authority.

In short, the anthology tells us what kinds of violence globalization generates and why in structural terms; FCP adds a framework for how those violent dynamics might be transformed into relationally secure, restorative, and sustainable global systems rather than simply managed or repressed. Peter Evans' 2008 article *Is an Alternative Globalization Possible?* examines the structural crisis of neoliberal globalization through the lens of Karl Polanyi's "double movement." Evans argues that unrestrained market expansion inevitably provokes societal pushback when it undermines the social and ecological foundations of life. In his view, the late 20th- and early 21st-century surge of transnational activism and what he calls the "movement of movements" represents the latest iteration of this protective counterforce. These diverse actors, from labor unions and environmental organizations to indigenous sovereignty and feminist movements, have the potential to converge into a counter-hegemonic globalization: a globally coordinated transformation prioritizing democratic governance, equitable human development, and ecological sustainability. For Evans, such an alternative is possible, but only if these movements can overcome organizational fragmentation and develop a coherent shared vision.

The Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) provides this cohesion and approaches the same terrain from a different starting point. Whereas Evans' framework focuses on political economy and the dialectic between market forces and protective movements, FCP emphasizes the systemic role of conflict as both a sign of dysfunction and a mechanism of self-regulation. In FCP, societal breakdowns are not aberrations to be smoothed over, but necessary indicators of where relational, emotional, and structural repair is needed. This framework adds a psychological and relational dimension to Evans' political-economic analysis: neoliberal globalization is not only exploitative in material terms but is also traumatizing in social and emotional terms, eroding trust, collective agency, and the capacity for cooperation. For FCP, resistance movements are not just political forces, but also collective healing responses.

When contrasted, Evans offers a map of the structural forces at play, while FCP offers a theory of how conflict can be integrated into a

restorative and regenerative order. Evans identifies the possibility of counter-hegemonic globalization but leaves its psychological and relational underpinnings largely unexplored. FCP fills that gap by explaining how such a counter-hegemony could be sustained without reproducing the coercive logics of the old order. By treating conflict as a vital, self-regulating force that must be guided by emotional security, relational trust, and systemic healing, FCP provides the scaffolding for the kind of plural, democratic, and sustainable globalization that Evans envisions, ensuring it is not just a shift in power but a transformation in how power itself is organized and exercised.

Where *Globalization, the State, and Violence* diagnoses how neoliberal globalization erodes state sovereignty, fragments societies, and fuels both structural and direct violence, Evans' *Is an Alternative Globalization Possible?* offers a strategic counterpoint by identifying the potential for a "counter-hegemonic globalization" emerging from the world's "movement of movements." Taken together, they form a two-part narrative: Friedman's volume explains the destabilizing, often violent consequences of global economic restructuring, while Evans proposes a way such disruption could be organized into a transformative political project. The Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) bridges and expands these insights by reframing violence and unrest as self-regulating signals of systemic dysfunction and evidence that the global order has violated fundamental relational, emotional, and ecological needs instead of simply as breakdowns or threats to be controlled. FCP adds that these conflicts, when addressed through trauma-informed and restorative approaches, can be converted into the very foundation of a plural, democratic, and sustainable alternative globalization. In this way, FCP does not merely explain the emergence of counter-hegemonic forces; it offers the relational and psychological architecture necessary to sustain them without replicating the coercive logics of the old order.

All of Our Relations: FCP and Decolonization, from Theory to Practice

By using FCP as the guiding framework, Western societies would avoid the common pitfall of symbolic reconciliation without structural change. Instead, they would embed mechanisms that ensure that conflict, which is inevitable in pluralistic societies, becomes a driver of adaptation, healing, and shared sovereignty rather than a trigger for renewed domination. Decolonization in practice requires more than symbolic gestures: it requires shifting legal authority, reallocating land and resources, remaking institutions, restoring and funding Indigenous knowledge and languages, and changing economic and social relations so power is shared rather than merely acknowledged. The Western world could effectively decolonize itself by committing to a systemic transformation that goes beyond symbolic gestures and directly addresses the political, economic, and epistemic structures that perpetuate coloniality. Drawing from examples like the Zapatista movement in Mexico, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and New Zealand's recognition of Māori sovereignty, decolonization in the West would require redistributing land and resources, restoring Indigenous governance systems, and recognizing Indigenous law as equal to state law.

This means moving from consultation toward actual co-governance or sovereignty-sharing agreements, as seen in New Zealand's Te Tiriti o Waitangi settlements and Canada's self-government agreements with First Nations. Educational systems would also need to be fundamentally reoriented to include Indigenous epistemologies as core knowledge systems, not as supplemental "cultural" additions. Economically, this involves dismantling extractive capitalist frameworks in favor of regenerative, locally governed economies that return agency to historically marginalized communities. Finally, it requires confronting the psychological and cultural legacies of colonialism, or what decolonial theorists call the coloniality of being, through collective

healing and unlearning of Eurocentric supremacy narratives. In this sense, decolonization is not an act of charity but a process of restoring balance, repairing relationships, and restructuring the foundations of governance and knowledge production.

Western societies would stand to gain several profound benefits by committing to genuine decolonization. First, sharing sovereignty and restoring Indigenous governance systems would enhance legitimacy and trust in democratic institutions, which are increasingly strained by polarization, inequality, and declining public confidence. Co-governance models rooted in reciprocity and consensus offer more resilient forms of decision-making that could stabilize governance in pluralistic societies. Second, recognizing Indigenous law and knowledge systems would expand the epistemic base of Western societies, bringing in land-based, relational, and ecological wisdom urgently needed to address climate change and environmental collapse. This is not charity but survival; Indigenous stewardship practices have sustained ecosystems for millennia and provide models for regenerative economies and ecological governance.

Third, systemic decolonization would yield social and economic benefits by reducing the costs of ongoing colonial harm: mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples, health disparities, land degradation, and endless cycles of litigation and protest. Addressing these structurally would save resources and create healthier, more cohesive societies. Finally, the West would gain moral credibility and global leadership by moving beyond symbolic gestures to embody justice in action, transforming its role from colonizer to collaborator. In an interconnected world facing crises of legitimacy, climate, and inequality, Western societies have everything to gain by demonstrating that systems can evolve toward equity, reciprocity, and shared power, because such transformation strengthens the very foundations of collective survival.

Decolonization is not just a political issue, it is a profound moral imperative and a necessary foundation for healing the deep wounds caused by centuries of colonial violence. Indigenous peoples continue to suffer from dispossession, cultural erasure, and systemic inequities that fuel cycles of trauma and social instability. Without meaningful, structural change, these harms persist, fracturing communities and

undermining the future for all of us. The Functional Conflict Perspective teaches us that conflict is not something to be ignored or suppressed, it is a vital signal and opportunity to transform harm into healing. By embracing trauma-informed, restorative governance models, decolonization moves us beyond symbolic apologies toward genuine power-sharing, trust-building, and relational justice.

Moreover, Indigenous governance honors long-term sustainable care for the planet, land, communities, and cultures, all of which are urgently needed alternatives to extractive systems driving ecological collapse. Decolonization benefits everyone by creating fairer, healthier societies rooted in respect, reciprocity, and shared sovereignty. This is about justice, survival, and renewal. It is about creating societies where all people and the Earth can thrive together.

Why this decolonization push, grounded in the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) and decolonial theory, is critically important:

1. Healing Historical and Intergenerational Trauma:

Colonialism isn't just a historical fact; its consequences including dispossession, cultural erasure, and systemic violence are ongoing and deeply traumatic for Indigenous peoples. FCP shows us that unaddressed trauma fuels cycles of conflict, distrust, and social instability. Meaningful decolonization creates pathways for collective healing by addressing the root causes of harm, not just its symptoms.

2. Building Relational Stability and Shared Sovereignty:

FCP reframes conflict as a signal of dysfunction but also as potential energy for transformation. By instituting trauma-informed, co-governance models that redistribute power and authority, decolonization shifts societies from zero-sum domination to relational coexistence. This creates durable social cohesion rooted in mutual respect and shared stewardship rather than control and coercion.

3. Environmental and Economic Sustainability:

Indigenous governance models tend to prioritize long-term ecological health and community well-being, contrasting with the extractive, short-term logics of colonial-capitalism. Decolonization

facilitates a shift toward regenerative economies that care for land, people, and culture holistically, which is an urgent need in the face of global climate crises.

4. Justice and Equity for All:

Decolonization is not only about Indigenous peoples. It challenges the colonial power hierarchies that shape social inequality for all marginalized groups. By dismantling systemic racism and inequity, societies can build more just, democratic institutions that benefit everyone.

5. Fulfilling Moral and Legal Obligations:

International law (e.g., UNDRIP) and numerous national commitments mandate the recognition of Indigenous rights and reparations. Meaningful decolonization upholds these obligations, restoring legitimacy to governments and advancing global human rights.

Bottom line: This work is essential because without systemic change, colonial harms persist and worsen. The Functional Conflict Perspective provides the framework for transforming conflict from destructive cycles into restorative, adaptive systems that rebuild trust, sovereignty, and shared futures. FCP makes decolonization operational by insisting that structural fixes (land, law, money) be yoked to trauma-informed relational practices and institutional designs that prevent re-enclosure of power. When implemented with Indigenous leadership, these policies convert conflict, both historical and contemporary, into a generative process for systemic renewal rather than cyclical harm.

To show how systemic decolonization would materially benefit Western societies, the case can be grounded in real-world examples across several domains. Economically, restoring Indigenous land rights reduces litigation costs and fosters sustainable management practices. For instance, New Zealand's co-management of fisheries with Māori iwi has improved long-term yields and ensured ecosystem health, benefiting both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Environmentally, Indigenous stewardship has been proven to safeguard biodiversity: a UN study found that Indigenous-managed lands contain 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity, highlighting how integrating this knowledge

directly strengthens Western nations' climate resilience and food security. Socially, addressing inequality reduces public costs; in Canada, First Nations-led child welfare programs have been shown to improve outcomes while lowering foster care expenses. Politically, co-governance models such as New Zealand's Te Urewera Board, which manages former national parkland through a partnership between the Crown and Māori, have increased trust in government by embodying power-sharing agreements rather than symbolic gestures. Finally, globally, countries that advance authentic reconciliation strengthen their credibility and leadership; for example, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has positioned it as a global model for transitional justice, improving diplomatic standing despite ongoing challenges. By tying decolonization to these concrete outcomes, the argument becomes not just about justice but about advancing long-term economic stability, ecological sustainability, social cohesion, political legitimacy, and global influence, which are outcomes that serve the entire society and planet.

Concrete actions for effective decolonization (with example → policy implication)

1.Return and secure land rights (EZLN & Māori lessons).

- Action: Create legally enforceable processes to return lands, establish long-term leases, or recognize co-management of protected areas. Prioritize customary title where Indigenous occupancy/connection exists.
- Why: Land sovereignty is foundational for cultural survival, food autonomy, and ecological stewardship (Zapatista autonomy; Māori Treaty settlements). (Simpson, 2011; Walker, 2004)

2.Establish legally recognized political autonomy and co-governance.

- Action: Implement models of local autonomy (municipal or regional) and co-governance arrangements for natural resources, education, and health, with binding, enforceable powers.

- Why: The EZLN's autonomous municipalities and New Zealand's co-management examples show how devolved authority prevents top-down imposition and supports self-determination. (Simpson, 2011)

3.Truth-telling, restorative justice, and institutional accountability (Canada's TRC model).

- Action: Commission independent truth and reparations processes for historical harms (land theft, residential schools, forced assimilation), link findings to legal reforms and reparative payments. Ensure processes are trauma-informed and led by Indigenous bodies.
- Why: Truth commissions surface harms and make legal/financial remedies politically and morally possible; must be accompanied by structural change so that apologies aren't just symbolic. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)

4.Constitutional & legal recognition of Indigenous rights (plus adoption of UNDRIP principles).

- Action: Amend constitutions or national law to recognize Indigenous nations and their rights to self-determination, language, land, and customary law; explicitly align domestic law with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Why: Legal recognition transforms bargaining power and makes co-governance durable. (UNDRIP, 2007)

5.Substantive economic restructuring: fund Indigenous economies and cooperative models.

- Action: Direct investment funds, preferential procurement, tax reforms, and support for cooperatives and community-led enterprises; reconfigure development metrics away from GDP to wellbeing indicators.

- Why: The Zapatistas' cooperative economies and Indigenous economic programs require real capital and policy supports to be viable alternatives to extractive models (such as capitalism). (Simpson, 2011)

6.Language, education, and epistemic reform.

- Action: Make Indigenous languages core curriculum elements (fund immersion schools), integrate Indigenous knowledges into public education, and require cultural competency training across public institutions.
- Why: Language revitalization in New Zealand and Indigenous education reforms in Canada show how culture transmission undergirds political resurgence. (Walker, 2004; Simpson, 2011)

7.Institutional redesign: diversify governance bodies and senior appointments.

- Action: Mandate Indigenous representation and veto/co-decision powers on boards overseeing lands, natural resources, cultural heritage, and major infrastructure projects; reform police and justice systems with Indigenous legal traditions and restorative models.
- Why: Representation without real power is hollow; institutional design must embed Indigenous decision rights. (Walker, 2004)

8.Environmental stewardship & Indigenous stewardship agreements.

- Action: Shift conservation and resource policy to recognize Indigenous stewardship rights, fund Indigenous land guardians, and create co-managed protected areas with Indigenous legal regime recognition.
- Why: Indigenous land management is both decolonial and effective for climate/ecological resilience (Zapatista/local practices; Māori kaitiakitanga: guardianship). (Simpson, 2011)

9.Fiscal reparations and redistributive policy.

- Action: Commit long-term fiscal transfers, reparations funds, and social-investment programs targeted to Indigenous nations (housing, health, education), governed in partnership with Indigenous institutions.
- Why: Material restitution addresses intergenerational poverty rooted in dispossession and provides the resources for real autonomy. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)

10. Protect epistemic pluralism: research, media, and cultural policy.

- Action: Fund Indigenous-run media, academic centers, and cultural institutions; require consent and equitable benefit-sharing for research on Indigenous lands and knowledge.
- Why: Decolonization demands institutional spaces where Indigenous worldviews are normative, not marginalized. (Simpson, 2011)

Sequencing, safeguards, and anti-cooptation measures

- Start with legal changes and land/tenure security (creates baseline for other reforms).
- Parallel truth-telling and funding streams so recognition is not only symbolic.
- Design implementation with Indigenous leadership, not as experts to consult but as partners/decision-makers.
- Anti-cooptation: Tie funding and recognition to accountability checks (community-led audits; legal enforceability); use time-bound benchmarks and independent oversight.
- Trauma-informed approach: All processes (truth commissions, restitution programs) must be designed to minimize harm and support healing (FCP point: attend to relational trauma).

Decolonizing the Western world effectively means shifting power, not merely rhetoric: legal sovereignty, land return, co-governance, reparative finance, and cultural/educational regeneration must be implemented together and led by Indigenous peoples. The Zapatistas teach the power of local autonomy and cooperative economies; Canada

shows both the promise and pitfalls of state-driven remediation; Aotearoa/New Zealand demonstrates how treaty processes and language revival can be institutionalized. Adopting a coherent package of legal, fiscal, institutional, and cultural reforms which are sequenced and governed by Indigenous partners offers the most credible path to genuine decolonization.

Drawing from the Zapatista movement, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation processes, and New Zealand's Treaty-based governance reforms, effective decolonization in the Western world would require a multi-pronged approach rooted in power redistribution, epistemic justice, and land sovereignty. First, like the Zapatistas' autonomous governance in Chiapas, Western states could enable localized, self-determined governance for Indigenous and marginalized communities that are supported by constitutional protections, not just policy promises. Second, inspired by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there must be sustained institutional commitment to addressing historical wrongs through reparations, curriculum reform, and structural reforms to law, policing, and resource management. Third, following New Zealand's Treaty of Waitangi co-governance model, Western governance systems could integrate legally binding power-sharing agreements that give Indigenous and minority groups equal authority over policy areas such as environmental stewardship, education, and cultural preservation. Finally, decolonization in the West cannot stop at recognition, it must dismantle extractive economic systems, restore land rights, and invest in regenerative, community-led economies that replace the colonial logics of domination with relationships of reciprocity and care. This is not a symbolic project but a material and structural transformation of governance, economics, and culture toward equity and shared sovereignty.

Rationale

International law, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), affirms these rights. The Functional Conflict Perspective shows that unresolved historical trauma will continue to destabilize societies unless power imbalances are actively addressed through restorative, not coercive, governance. Decolonization

benefits not only Indigenous nations but entire societies by creating more sustainable, equitable, and emotionally healthy systems.

Conclusion

True reconciliation requires more than apologies or symbolic recognition. It demands the dismantling of colonial structures and the full restoration of Indigenous self-determination. By adopting the reforms above, all Western colonized countries can begin to repair historical and ongoing harms and build an equitable, just global society. We urge immediate legislative action to implement these reforms, with Indigenous peoples as primary architects of the process. Failure to act perpetuates systemic harm and undermines global commitments to justice and sustainability.

Conclusion: Relational Re-Rooting

"Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." -Desmond Tutu

In my Introduction to Social Research class, the professor Dr. Kathryn DuBois displayed a slide that says “the most secular countries –those with the highest proportion of atheists and agnostics –are among the most stable, peaceful, free, wealthy, and healthy societies.” The class is asked to guess why the assertion might be flawed. I raise my hand and offer, “because it’s inverted logic, and in reality, people who have most of their needs met don’t need to outsource their morality?” The teacher nods in my direction. In Anthropology, the discordant hypothesis states that humans have lived as hunter-gatherers for 90% of human history, meaning there are currently significant disparities between how we have evolved biologically and physically with our current environment and its structures (Konner, 2001). Several diseases have been interpreted as “diseases of civilization” because they appear to result from this disjunction; examples of “diseases of civilization” include cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, certain cancers (such as colon or breast cancer), asthma and allergies, depression and anxiety disorders, and osteoporosis. I propose that “disorders of civilization” also exist; autism would be considered a disorder of civilization because it is socially defined and like many other social-emotional “disorders”, describes how hunter-gatherer nervous systems function normally within capitalist, colonial systems and respond to oppressive top-down power structures that rely on inverted logic.

Hunter-gatherers relied primarily on restorative and reparative justice, because group cohesion was necessary for individual and collective survival (Carey, 2016; Center for Humans and Nature, 2017; Bradshaw Foundation, 2017; Bohem, 2001). In 2019, Carey said “in general, hunter-gatherer bands practice General Reciprocity, where everyone shares all the time with others in the group. There are few personal possessions. Refusing to share was a serious breach of the peace in the community, because sharing ensures the survival of everyone in the group.” In its modern context, restorative justice separates the actor

from the action being done, using context from the environment and history to understand multiple perspectives. Founded on a presumption that everyone is doing as best they can with what resources they have available to them, it seeks to provide everyone who is struggling with what they need to succeed. Because a system based on grace can only exist in the present moment and can not co-exist with resentments from the past, this leaves punitive justice as a last resort. Guilt, shame, sin, repentance, punishment are all features of patriarchal hierarchies, and do not occur systemically in hunter-gatherer societies, which often prioritize practices aimed at repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and maintaining social cohesion within the group, rather than simply focusing on retribution. Our hunter-gatherer bodies are wired for restorative justice, and the current punitive justice system is not compatible with the human nervous system. Autism's social cognition differences and sensitivity to power-over relational dynamics are direct evidence of this evolutionary discord.

New research suggests some characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorder may be partially influenced by DNA inherited from Neanderthals tens of thousands of years ago. Researchers from Clemson and Loyola Universities analyzed whole-genome data and found that certain Neanderthal-derived variants appear more often in autistic individuals. But the findings suggest that some traits now recognized in autism may trace back to ancient adaptations. In early human groups, abilities like heightened focus, pattern recognition, or tool-making could have been valuable for survival (Pauly et al, 2024). These characteristics and traits include natural evolutionary variations in social differences; for this reason and based on the discordant hypothesis Autism In America: One Woman's Search For Healing redefines autism as a sociological issue, not a psychological one. This book explores autism as a spectrum of social cognition differences with potential evolutionary roots related to systemizing abilities. As mentioned in Planet Babel, the publication titled "The Autistic Neo-Neanderthal Tribe and the Harappan Asuric..." (Kurup and Kurup, 2017) also mentions a hypothesis relating increased autism prevalence in the Dravidian Nair community to Neanderthal features and metabolomics, the comprehensive study and analysis of the complete set of small molecule metabolites and their products within a biological system, known as the metabolome. It is used

to understand a cell's or organism's response to its environment by analyzing molecules such as amino acids, lipids, and organic acids, which are influenced by factors like diet, disease, and environmental exposures. Dr. Emily Casanova, a neuroscientist and assistant professor at Loyola University New Orleans, has conducted research exploring the evolutionary origins of autism susceptibility genes. While she has not explicitly categorized autism into a distinct evolutionary group, her work suggests that autism-related genes are ancient and highly conserved across species. For example, in her 2019 study, she found that autism risk genes are evolutionarily ancient and maintain a unique feature landscape that echoes their function. There are several other researchers who have explored evolutionary perspectives on autism, including the idea that autism may represent distinct evolutionary adaptations or groups within human neurodiversity. Some notable figures and their contributions include Simon Baron-Cohen, who explores autism as a spectrum of social cognition differences with potential evolutionary roots related to systemizing abilities; Christopher Gillburg, who has contributed to understanding the heritability and complex gene-environment interactions in autism; Edward H. Hagen, noted for evolutionary theories of depression but also interested in neurodivergence broadly, who explores how certain psychological traits, including those on the autism spectrum, may be adaptive in evolutionary contexts; Michael Fitzgerald, a clinical psychiatrist who has written about autism from an evolutionary and developmental perspective, posited that autism represents a neurodevelopmental variation that has persisted due to certain adaptive advantages.

In *The Science of Sociology*, *Autism In America* explores how a sociological lens reframes autism not as an individual impairment, but as a relational mismatch between neurodivergent individuals and neurotypical social expectations. It draws attention to how institutions such as schools, workplaces, and healthcare systems enforce neurotypical standards of normalcy, often marginalizing or excluding autistic individuals through policies, practices, and cultural assumptions that are inherently ableist. A sociological perspective reveals that the problem is not autistic people, but a society structured around narrow definitions of intelligence, sociality, and worth. In *Neurodivergence as Relational Resistance*, the pathologization of neurodivergent individuals

is reframed as a systemic response to their resistance to social disconnection. This positions neurodivergence as a kind of nervous system sensitivity that is evolutionarily suited for collective regulation and attunement, which colonial systems of symbolic domination seek to sever. This reframing challenges conventional definitions of mental health and reveals the deep ideological violence embedded in psychiatric labeling, education, and social norms. In *Western Parenting Impacts on Human Development and Behavior: America's Hidden Health Crisis and How Autism and Decolonial Theory are Related*, this book shows how colonization operates on the nervous system and cognition, disproportionately affecting the neurodivergent and autistic populations specifically due to the discordant hypothesis and the fact that human hunter-gatherer biology is mismatched to capitalist and colonial systems. With its heightened nervous system attunement and sensitivity, autism and other neurodivergence is the canary in the coalmine, calling attention to harmful social practices and the damage that “power over” hierarchical social systems does to our collective nervous system, which communicates its distress through human behavior and cognitive processes. Through a trauma informed, FCP lens, substance abuse and addiction can also be understood as the nervous system communicating distress by self medicating the vagus nerve's felt relational ruptures, which are inherent features of capitalist authoritarian structures.

Gaslighting individuals for systemic issues and blaming people for problems they didn't cause (like substance abuse, the health effects of poverty, or pathologizing distress behaviors instead of addressing the system's flaws) is a capitalist form of structured violence that enables generational cycles of relational trauma and C-PTSD to repeat themselves. Trauma symptoms are not a matter of choice or willpower, trauma is an injury to the nervous system. The body responds to this injury by recalibrating its internal warning system. These symptoms are not a conscious choice, they are a nervous system response that the body undergoes reflexively. In a majority of cases, traumatized individuals may not be aware of their trauma because the brain attempts to forget triggering events, but the body still remembers, making behavior the primary form for the nervous system to communicate its internal distress. It's important to note that trauma itself is not a choice, and most adult autistics have been forced to learn how to self heal themselves out of

necessity, because relational trauma is an inherent feature of capitalism, and therefore affects autistics' underpruned and excess synapses disproportionately.

The brain often attempts to forget or suppress traumatic events because its primary function is survival, not accurate memory keeping. When an experience overwhelms the nervous system, the brain may protect itself by shutting down conscious recall, a process sometimes referred to as dissociation or memory fragmentation. This allows the individual to keep functioning day-to-day without being constantly re-triggered by the full emotional intensity of the trauma. However, because the nervous system encodes threat responses at a bodily level, the “forgetting” is incomplete: triggers such as smells, sounds, or relational cues can reactivate the stored survival responses without the person fully understanding why.

This reaction is far from rare. Research in trauma psychology shows that a significant portion of people who endure overwhelming experiences, especially in childhood, will have partial or absent recall of those events. For instance, studies on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) demonstrate that trauma-related amnesia and dissociation are common adaptations, not anomalies. In this way, the brain's protective forgetting is both widespread and deeply human; it is a survival mechanism to minimize suffering in the short term, even though it can perpetuate unresolved trauma in the long term. The nervous system's survival hierarchy (fight/flight/freeze) makes forgetting a logical adaptation.

The *Emerging Adulthood* by Arnett and *Changes in the Transition to Adulthood in the UK and Canada* by Cote and Bynner both show that given the structural factors that prolong the transition to adulthood, including economic conditions, the need for more education, and the decline of social norms, it would be more accurate to consider reaching adulthood without delays to developmental trajectory as a privileged experience; rather than “emerging adulthood” being a universally experienced developmental stage, especially with consideration to the varied experiences of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. This makes autism, considered a developmental disability,

intersectionally both a class and socio-economic issue just as much as a sociological or psychological one.

Creating a shared narrative or shared meaning is the highest level of Drs. John and Julie Gottman's Sound Relationship House, which is "a model on how to have a healthy relationship in which a couple can intentionally create a sense of purpose together." (Gaspard, T. 2017) I believe that social issues, from inequality and alienation to violence and ecological collapse, are all different expressions of trauma that haven't been integrated at relational, emotional, and structural levels. Institutions, laws, and economies often reproduce collective trauma (through coercion, exclusion, or domination), but they could also be reshaped to function restoratively through development and use of a trauma informed theory for relating and governance. When we approach intersectionality from a trauma informed standpoint the answer can be found in the fact that we are wired for connection but capitalism creates scarcity and relies on a framework of punitive justice which puts human nervous systems into permanent survival mode. In Anthropology, the discordant hypothesis states that humans have lived as hunter-gatherers for 90% of human history, meaning there are currently significant disparities between how we have evolved biologically and physically with our current environment and its structures (Konner, 2001). Hunter-gatherers relied primarily on restorative and reparative justice, because group cohesion was necessary for individual and collective survival (Carey, 2016; Center for Humans and Nature, 2017; Bradshaw Foundation, 2017; Bohem, 2001). Gaslighting individuals for systemic issues and blaming people for problems they didn't cause (like the health effects of poverty, or pathologizing distress behaviors as mental health issues) is a capitalist form of structured violence that enables generational cycles of relational trauma to repeat themselves. It stands to reason that the best form of resistance we have against systems designed to break our nervous systems is acts of mutual aid, co-regulation, relational attunement, and to create community and support structures that subvert exploitative and extractive systems. The best way to do that is through a shared narrative, like the Gottman's said. The trauma informed movement could be that shared narrative, because all social injustice causes trauma, we all have nervous systems, and trauma is inherently relational. A society prioritizing nervous system health might

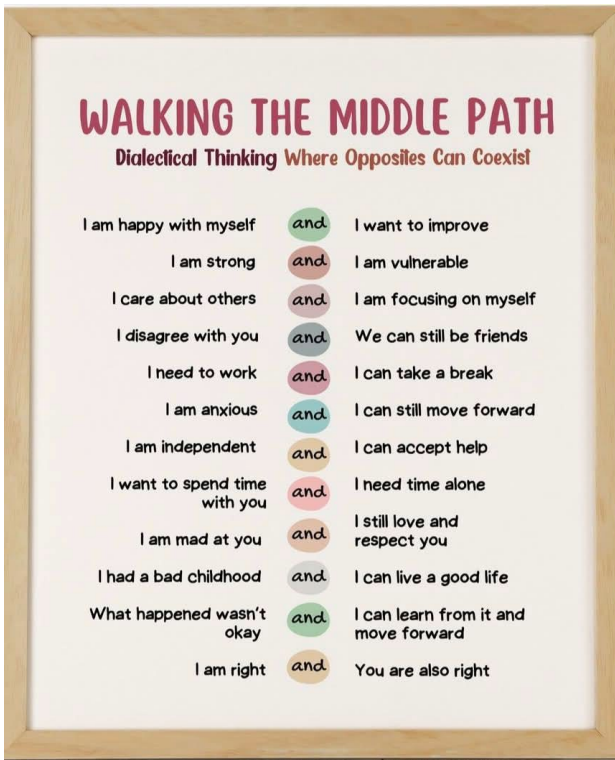
look like differences being celebrated and not just tolerated. Audre Lorde wrote “Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening Lorde, A. (1979).” The trauma informed movement, attachment and polyvagal theories can help us to develop the necessary dialectic and shared narrative that Lorde spoke of.

Gabor Mate has said that “the flaws of our leaders perfectly mirror the emotional underdevelopment of the society that elevates them to power.” Communities of autistic and neurodivergent people are pointing the way to healing America’s generational trauma through emotional development, relational repair and nervous system regulation. Autistic Standpoint Theory is timely and important to the field of social theory, alerting the rest of Western society to an urgent need for relational and structural reform that places nervous system health and restorative justice as its top priorities. Autism's hypersensitivities and overactive synaptic pruning act as the canary in the coalmine when viewing relational (emotionally underdeveloped) trauma behaviors through the body/mind connection (vagus nerve). *Childism and the Deficit Delusion* explores how class, economic and social inequalities are reinforced in an individualistic culture that pathologizes immaturity and underdeveloped emotions and childlike behaviors despite becoming fully developed humans being a privilege under capitalism.

Dialectics address the ways that differences can lead to greater understanding by presenting a claim or thesis alongside an antithesis or counterclaim. These combine to create a synthesis of ideas, such as Lorde referred to when discussing how to obtain social liberation. Audre Lorde wrote “Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening (1979).” These words, and her work in gender and sexuality studies as a feminist scholar, can also apply to autism and neurodivergencies polarity that is shared with neurotypical social norms and culture. Milton’s double empathy problem described the neurodivergent/neurotypical polarity, while the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) offers a solution to resolve and synthesize the claim (neurotypical empathy and individualistic social expectations) with the

counterclaim (neurodivergent empathy and relational social expectations). Instead of tolerance, which is the opposite of curiosity, there would be a mutual practice of relational safety, made possible when differences become celebrated. Relational safety looks like self reflection during conflict, and being able to bring up and discuss difficult topics while still choosing each other, which is what FCP describes as a theoretical social framework based on what a society prioritizing nervous system health might look like.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is a type of cognitive-behavioral therapy that focuses on teaching individuals skills to manage intense emotions, improve interpersonal relationships, and tolerate distress. It was initially developed to treat borderline personality disorder but has since been adapted for various mental health conditions. DBT can be seen as the individual-level practice of what FCP theorizes at the social level. DBT's core skills could inform how FCP designs trauma-informed institutions (e.g., teaching communities distress tolerance instead of relying on carceral punishment). FCP focuses on collective healing in institutions, governance, and economies should nurture emotional and relational well-being. DBT focuses on individual healing by teaching skills that help people integrate conflict and regulate their nervous systems. FCP and DBT are parallel frameworks at different scales. DBT helps individuals integrate inner conflict; FCP helps societies integrate collective conflict. Both are rooted in dialectics, emotional regulation, and the belief that conflict can be healing if held with care.



To restore the broken social mirror and look beyond it is not to return to some idealized past. It is to remember that we were never meant to live separated from each other, from the Earth, or from the deepest truths of who we are. What we call mental illness, disconnection, dysfunction, or disorder are not random anomalies. They are messages from a relational system out of balance, symptoms of a society that has forgotten how to belong to itself. Throughout these essays, I've traced fractures across institutions, cultures, languages, and nervous systems. I've witnessed how colonial frameworks embedded in psychiatry, education, and governance have mistaken compliance for well-being, and how systems of power punish those who diverge from the path of domination. But I've also felt the seeds stirring of the quiet knowledge that what has been broken can be re-rooted, and beneath the structures of harm is a deeper pattern of wholeness still intact. Relational re-rooting is not just a metaphor. It is a social, emotional, and ecological imperative that asks us to

shift from top-down control to bottom-up co-regulation, power with instead of power over dynamics, from individualism to interdependence, from punishment to restoration. It means honoring the intelligence of children, the resistance of the body, and the ancestral wisdom still alive in Indigenous, disabled, and neurodivergent ways of knowing. It means unlearning the language of domination and reclaiming the languages of care. We are not here to fix ourselves to fit a broken world. We are here to become more whole by remembering the parts that were shamed, silenced, or pathologized and reintegrating them.

The word trauma implies an absence of felt safety and a lack of relational care, and because it describes a negative it can be difficult to explain, understand and/or quantify. The experience of autistic individuals in American society of being consistently othered and relationally traumatized is actually by design for all citizens as a form of social control, but experienced more acutely by autistics due to their evolutionary development and synapses attuned for connection, co-regulation and collaboration.

To repair the colonial wound and re-root relationally is to come home to our bodies, our communities, and our responsibilities to one another. It is to acknowledge that true healing is never private, it is collective. And that the restoration of relationships within us, between us, and beyond us is the only real cure. The broken mirror has been polished. Now we begin the work of weaving it back into a window. This was not just a collection of essays; it was a cohesive philosophical and sociological treatise on the systems that fragment human consciousness and the paths we can take to restore it. The unifying frameworks I have developed are powerful tools for decoding the embedded trauma within social structures.

Autism in America: One Woman's Search for Healing is urgent and necessary. It has, in the earlier essays, described the social dysfunction lurking in the unhealed shadows of our collective systems and structures, but then reframes our understanding of dysfunction not as failure, but as a signal, mirror, and call to relational restoration.

These essays have laid the foundation for a paradigm shift in how we understand mind, society, and self, and have integrated:

Attachment theory, polyvagal theory, and child development

Cultural critique rooted in post-colonial and decolonial theory

Neurodivergence as sacred, not a deficit

Linguistic anthropology and pragmatics to reframe relational breakdowns

Trauma-informed governance, parenting, and collective healing

These frameworks have been applied with consistency across fields like education, psychiatry, employment policy, and Indigenous sovereignty. The tone I have used here is deeply accessible, especially for non-academic readers seeking language for their lived experience. This gives these essays transformational potential across multiple domains.

Afterword: Who Colonized Who; The Origins and Healing of the Human Divide

Until this point, this book has approached the topic of social justice as if there's a "bad guy." I've made claims of willful intentions on the part of religion, government, and society to foster individualism and demolish rationalism, and to some extent, have even provided examples of that (the parenting propaganda from WWII matching modern day media). But as a researcher I need to acknowledge my own biases. Because I am still healing from trauma, I also tend to see the world in very binary black and white terms at times. I've approached my research into systemic trauma and the dynamics of power and control looking for a villain, because in order to solve the problem of abuse there must be an abuser for instance, but what if the only villain is our own minds, and there are no bad guys at all? In this Afterword, I attempt to step outside my cognitive binary box from trauma and instead apply Hanlon's Razor, an adage stating that "never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity". It suggests that instead of assuming negative intentions, people should consider incompetence, carelessness, or a lack of awareness as a more likely cause for people's actions. This principle helps avoid anger, improves relationships, and promotes a more objective and less judgmental view of others. By analyzing colonization, domination, or even historical wrongdoing through the assumption of Hanlon's Razor, that harm often arises from confusion, fear, or dysregulation rather than pure malice, I am embodying the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) and Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) in real time and am performing three acts simultaneously:

Regulating the emotional charge of conflict.

Integrating the mirror by recognizing shared mechanisms behind harm.

Restoring function by transforming pain into systemic feedback.

This is precisely how both frameworks are meant to operate in practice: turning polarization into pattern recognition, blame into understanding, and history into self-awareness.

If we assume a lack of negative intentions, then who's really to blame?

Abstract

Who Colonized Who traces the deep evolutionary and psychological origins of colonization, not as a geopolitical event but as a transformation in the structure of consciousness itself. Drawing from neuroscience, linguistics, phenomenology, and decolonial theory, this paper argues that the first act of colonization occurred not between peoples, but within the human mind. The emergence of language, once a medium of connection, became the architecture of domination.

Building on findings in cognitive neuroscience (Bourguignon & Lo Bue, 2025; Benítez-Burraco & Progovac, 2024; Colagè & d'Errico, 2025), this work reinterprets linguistic evolution as a process that reorganized both the brain and society into hierarchies of control. Syntax and abstraction, while expanding cognition, introduced the first internal “colonies” between subject and object, self and other, mind and body. These neural and grammatical hierarchies externalized into the earliest social structures of patriarchy, religion, and empire, forming the foundation for systemic domination.

Integrating Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) and Mirror Integration Theory (MIT) with decolonial psychology (Holden et al., 2025), this paper reframes colonization as chronic nervous system dysregulation, a civilizational trauma that manifests as hyper-control, emotional avoidance, and disconnection from the relational field. Healing requires rehumanization: restoring the capacity for co-regulation, reflection, and belonging at both individual and systemic levels.

I. From Shared Beginnings to Separation

The human story begins in Africa. Genetic, linguistic, and archaeological evidence converges on the Out of Africa hypothesis, which situates the birth of *Homo sapiens* in East Africa roughly 200,000 years ago. Around 60,000 years ago, small groups began migrating outward through the Arabian Peninsula, eventually populating Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas. These early societies were cooperative, nomadic, and egalitarian. They relied on reciprocity, emotional attunement, and small-scale governance built on trust and kinship. There was no colonization in the modern sense. Movement across land was motivated by adaptation, not ideology, and the boundaries of community were fluid.

For nearly 190,000 years, humanity's survival depended on relational intelligence rather than domination. Hunter-gatherer societies maintained cohesion through shared language and emotional synchrony. The nervous system, the social brain, and the emerging capacity for symbolic communication evolved to sustain belonging. Then, roughly 12,000 years ago, a profound transformation occurred.

II. The Shift: From Migration to Colonization (≈12,000–10,000 BCE)

The Neolithic Revolution marked humanity's first large-scale act of colonization. As agriculture spread from the Fertile Crescent into the Nile Valley, Anatolia, and East Asia, land shifted from a shared resource to an owned commodity. The shift from foraging to farming introduced the first conceptual boundaries: "mine" and "yours." Property replaced reciprocity.

Anthropologist Riane Eisler (1987) describes this transition as the birth of the dominator model. Where partnership once structured social life, hierarchy emerged. Control over land became control over women, reproduction, and inheritance. The agricultural worldview divided humanity into rulers and laborers, civilized and wild.

Settled farmers began displacing nomadic peoples, seeing their fluid mobility as barbaric. This was the first ideological colonization, not yet racialized or global, but psychological. One worldview declared itself superior to another.

At the same time, new forms of communication began to scaffold these hierarchies. The cognitive systems that had evolved for cooperation: empathy, mimicry, shared intentionality were restructured to serve coordination, command, and surveillance. In this period, the human nervous system itself began adapting to authority.

III. Proto-Colonization: The Rise of Early Civilizations (≈5,000–3,000 BCE)

With the formation of city-states such as Sumer, Egypt, and the Indus Valley, colonization became organized. Territorial expansion, slavery, and tribute systems institutionalized power. Language, once relational, now encoded hierarchy. Cuneiform and hieroglyphics emerged as tools of recordkeeping and taxation, but soon became instruments of theology and law. The first written codes, such as Hammurabi's, formalized punishment, property, and patriarchal control.

The psychological foundation of coloniality took shape: domination through abstraction. By separating symbol from substance, civilization learned to control meaning itself. The “word” became a mechanism for social order, and fear and shame became its enforcement tools.

IV. Classical Empires (1500 BCE – 1500 CE): Expansion as Order

The next great wave of colonization occurred during the classical age of empire-building. The Persian Empire imposed tribute systems from Greece to India. Greek colonization spread settlement and culture across the Mediterranean. Rome absorbed Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, spreading Latin, law, and Christianity. In the East, the Han, Tang, and Ming dynasties extended Chinese rule through cultural Sinicization. The Arab-Islamic Caliphates unified trade, religion, and conquest from Spain to Central Asia, while the Mongol Empire later bound Eurasia under a single administrative network.

These empires expanded human connectivity but also perfected the machinery of hierarchy. Colonization became a tool for resource extraction and ideological conformity. Yet this was still not modern colonialism. Race had not yet been constructed as a biological rationale for domination.

V. Modern Coloniality (15th Century – Present)

True global colonialism began with the European maritime project. Portugal (1415) and Spain (1492) pioneered oceanic exploration, enslaving Africans and Indigenous Americans. England, France, and the Netherlands followed, building vast imperial systems rooted in extraction, conversion, and cultural erasure.

Aníbal Quijano (2000) identifies this as the birth of the colonial matrix of power, with control over land, labor, knowledge, gender, and spirituality through racial hierarchy. Walter Mignolo (2007) and María Lugones (2010) extend this analysis, showing that colonialism universalized a European worldview that equated whiteness, masculinity, and reason with civilization itself.

In this period, colonization expanded from geography to ontology. It no longer conquered territories alone but the very definitions of reality, knowledge, and being.

VI. Out of Africa: The Shared Origin of Relationality

Tracing backward through this long history, the pattern becomes clear. The first separation, between self and other, between word and world, was not political but neurological. To understand how colonization began, we must return to the emergence of language itself.

Ivan Colagè and Francesco d’Errico (2025) present an empirically grounded scenario for the evolution of cultural transmission in the human lineage. Over 3.3 million years, human culture advanced from imitation to cumulative teaching, where information was intentionally shaped for others’ understanding. This innovation made language not just a tool for survival but a mechanism of inheritance, transmitting mental models, not just behaviors.

The neurobiological implications were profound. Communication became self-referential, allowing reflection and planning but also control. It was within this shift that the architecture for hierarchy was born.

VII. The Neurocognitive Shift: Language, Domestication, and Control

Recent research reframes linguistic evolution through the human self-domestication hypothesis. Antonio Benítez-Burraco (2025) argues that as humans evolved to become more prosocial and less aggressive, they also became more linguistically complex. The taming of behavior enabled the emergence of syntax, grammar, and cooperation, but also increased social conformity.

Giovanna Di Paola, Ljiljana Progovac, and Benítez-Burraco (2023) extend this theory by exploring ideophones: sound-symbolic words that bridge the gap between sensory experience and language. Their findings suggest that early language was deeply embodied and affective, reflecting emotion and movement rather than abstraction. Over time, as self-domestication advanced, these sensory forms were replaced by syntax-driven systems.

Nathan Oesch's (2024) *Social Brain Perspectives* further supports this view, describing language as a co-evolutionary adaptation for managing social complexity. As brain networks expanded to handle larger groups, communication became essential for regulating social cohesion. Yet this same expansion produced vulnerability to symbolic domination. The neural circuits that once supported empathy became capable of enforcing conformity.

The cognitive integration of syntax, with the capacity to structure thought hierarchically, became the missing link between cooperation and control. Benítez-Burraco and Progovac (2024) describe syntax as the “linking theory” between brain evolution and social order. The neural mechanisms that process grammar mirror those that process authority. Syntax literally taught the mind to think hierarchically.

Eva-Maria Simms' (2011) *Egocentric Language and the Upheaval of Speech* offer phenomenological support for this argument. Simms demonstrates how language development in children mirrors humanity's civilizational arc: spontaneous, relational speech gives way to socially regulated grammar. The child's imaginative freedom is replaced by linguistic conformity. In this sense, civilization itself reenacts this developmental narrowing: the domestication of imagination through syntax.

Finally, Syed Mohammad Mashiur Rahman's (2025) *The Alchemy of Words* captures the ultimate transformation. Once language gained the

power to construct meaning, it also gained the power to distort it. Words no longer described reality; they manufactured it. Through this linguistic alchemy, colonization evolved from external conquest into epistemic control. To name was to own.

VIII. Colonization as Psychological Pattern

When viewed through this interdisciplinary lens, colonization appears as a neurocognitive adaptation gone awry. The same mechanisms that enabled cooperation such as shared attention, symbolic reasoning, and teaching became instruments of domination once disconnected from relational regulation.

Frantz Fanon (1961) and Paulo Freire (1970) describe how colonialism disfigures both oppressor and oppressed by severing relational reciprocity. Holden et al. (2025) extend this insight through a decolonial-liberation orientation grounded in the African principle of Sankofa, which calls humanity to remember what was lost. Colonization, they argue, must be healed not through ideology but through rehumanization and restoring the capacity for empathy and mutual regulation.

In biological terms, colonization is a trauma loop. The collective nervous system, dysregulated by fear and hierarchy, perpetuates control to avoid vulnerability. The healing process, therefore, is not only political but somatic. Humanity must remember how to feel safe in connection.

IX. Aboriginal Continuity and the Memory of Wholeness

Indigenous Australians and other First Nations peoples embody a continuity that predates colonization's divide. Their languages preserve relational grammars that integrate land, self, and community into a single living system. These traditions reveal that the human default state is not domination but ecological attunement.

From this perspective, colonization began when humanity forgot what Indigenous cultures remembered: that the Earth, language, and consciousness are not separate entities but interdependent expressions of one relational field.

X. Conclusion: Remembering the Grammar of Belonging

The more a system is disconnected from empathy and regulation, the more it acts out its fear as control. FCP interprets this not as moral corruption but as functional breakdown, where the system is doing the wrong thing for the right (unconscious) reason: survival. When we call someone “evil,” we disown our capacity for cruelty, control, or avoidance. That projection preserves identity coherence (“I’m good; they’re bad”) but at the cost of integration.

Every time a society constructs villains, it splits its own psyche into light vs. dark, savior vs. enemy, and this split perpetuates violence because it keeps the underlying fear unexamined.

The colonizer sees the colonized as “savage.” The revolutionary sees the oppressor as “monster.” Each mirrors the other’s fragmentation. From the MIT view, true healing begins when we can look at harm and say: “This too is part of the system.” You are another part of me. When we remove the idea of villains, we decolonize morality itself because the colonial worldview depends on dualism with civilized/savage, saved/damned, good/evil. By dissolving these binaries, we dismantle the psychological infrastructure of colonization. This is what Sankofa and ubuntu teach: every being is part of the same relational field.

Colonization began the moment language ceased to be relational and became instrumental. Syntax, abstraction, and hierarchy were adaptive for coordination but maladaptive for compassion. Over time, this cognitive pattern scaled into political systems, religions, and empires. Yet the story of colonization is also the story of possibility. Every mechanism that created hierarchy can be reoriented toward harmony. The same brain that learned domination can learn co-regulation. The same language that built empires can rebuild belonging.

As the African wisdom of Sankofa teaches, healing begins by going back to retrieve what was lost. To decolonize is to remember that meaning is mutual, that truth is relational, and that the grammar of life itself was never meant to divide. To heal harm, we must integrate the disowned parts of the collective self, even and especially those that terrify us.

- There are no “bad guys,” only dysregulated systems acting out unresolved trauma.

- “Villains” are narrative constructs created to manage collective fear.
- The idea of “evil” is the ultimate colonial abstraction and the division of humanity into worthy and unworthy.
- True justice is not retribution but reintegration and bringing the disowned parts of humanity back into resonance.

Postscript: The Language Instinct and the Restoration of Meaning

Steven Pinker’s theory in *The Language Instinct* adds depth to this reflection by returning language to its biological roots. He describes language not as a cultural ornament or invention of civilization but as a product of evolution, a natural adaptation that arose to strengthen cooperation and understanding among early humans. In this light, language was never meant to dominate. It was a shared instinct that allowed empathy, memory, and social cohesion to flourish. When language became abstracted into systems of power, it lost contact with its original purpose. What began as a bridge between minds became the first border. The corruption of this instinct was the beginning of colonization itself, not by one group over another, but by the mind over its own nature.

To restore what was lost, humanity must return language to its evolutionary purpose: connection. Healing requires more than rewriting history; it demands reclaiming the biological function of communication as mutual regulation and shared meaning. Pinker’s insight reminds us that cooperation, not conquest, is the foundation of human survival. The instinct for language is the instinct for belonging, and when we speak from that place, words become a living system again. They can reorganize the nervous system toward safety, rebuild trust, and repair the fracture between intellect and emotion. When language remembers its origin in empathy, it stops colonizing and starts listening. In that remembering, humanity rediscovers itself. This book has used a lot of words to convey and explore from multiple angles using a combination of theoretical lenses that the double standard centered on the United States defining autism as a socially deficient condition without providing supports and appropriate social environments exposes the cracks in the very foundation of colonial social norms (Nagar 2025), making visible the fear and control underlying American culture.

Appendix A

Relevant U.S. Constitutional and Statutory Laws

First Amendment and *Yates v. United States* (1957)

The First Amendment protects freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry, even when such speech challenges the state or established social norms. In *Yates v. United States* (1957), the Supreme Court distinguished between abstract advocacy of revolutionary ideas and direct incitement to unlawful action, ruling that only the latter falls outside constitutional protection. Autism in America clearly operates within protected boundaries, engaging in philosophical and systemic critique rather than calling for violence. The book's radical analysis of governance and psychiatry constitutes academic dissent, not subversion, and is protected as political and intellectual expression.

***Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969)**

Expanding *Yates*, *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969) held that speech is protected unless it is both intended and likely to produce "imminent lawless action." These precedent safeguards even strong or revolutionary ideas that remain theoretical. Snow's writing aligns with this protection, as it invites readers to imagine systemic healing and transformation through relational governance, not through physical uprising. The book's advocacy for consciousness, reform, and cooperation represents transformative speech, not incitement.

***Keyishian v. Board of Regents* (1967)**

In *Keyishian v. Board of Regents* (1967), the Supreme Court affirmed that academic freedom is a "special concern of the First Amendment." This protects scholars who critique dominant ideologies or institutions. Snow's manuscript, grounded in sociological and psychological inquiry, falls within this sphere of academic protection. Her critique of education, psychiatry, and governance is precisely the kind of controversial academic discourse that the Court sought to safeguard.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990; amended 2008)

The ADA prohibits discrimination based on disability and mandates reasonable accommodations in education, employment, and public life. Autism in America echoes the ADA's intent but extends it, arguing that inclusion must move beyond compliance to embrace emotional, relational, and systemic reform. Snow's call for trauma-informed governance represents an evolution of ADA principles, shifting the focus from procedural equality to relational justice and belonging.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Section 504 ensures that any program or activity receiving federal funds cannot discriminate against individuals with disabilities. This statute is foundational for educational and institutional equity. Snow's critique of schools, workplaces, and mental health systems parallels the spirit of Section 504 by exposing how structural barriers and ableist language still marginalize neurodivergent individuals. Her analysis underscores the ongoing need to translate legal equality into lived inclusion.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1975)

The IDEA guarantees free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities and emphasizes individualized support. Snow's work resonates deeply with IDEA's principles, particularly her critique of punitive and conformity-driven educational models. She reframes neurodivergent learning as a collective responsibility, reinforcing IDEA's goal of tailoring education to diverse needs rather than enforcing uniformity.

O'Connor v. Donaldson (1975)

In *O'Connor v. Donaldson* (1975), the Supreme Court ruled that a state cannot confine a non-dangerous person capable of surviving safely outside an institution. This case set the modern standard for mental health liberty. Snow's critique of coercive psychiatric systems parallels this decision, arguing that pathologizing difference often leads to unnecessary control and confinement. Her framework supports the right to autonomy and self-determination for those labeled mentally ill or disabled.

Olmstead v. L.C. (1999)

In *Olmstead v. L.C.* (1999), the Court held that unjustified institutionalization of individuals with disabilities violates the ADA. The ruling promotes community integration and independent living. Autism in America reflects Olmstead's vision by advocating for trauma-informed, community-based systems that replace isolation with connection and care. The book transforms legal precedent into a social and emotional ethic of inclusion.

Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment

The Equal Protection Clause guarantees that no state shall "deny to any person the equal protection of the laws." This clause underpins all modern civil rights protections. Snow's analysis of structural trauma and systemic inequity connects directly to this principle, framing emotional and social exclusion as a form of unequal treatment. Her argument that relational disconnection mirrors institutional discrimination aligns with the constitutional promise of equality.

Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VI

Title VI prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in any program receiving federal funding. Snow's intersectional analysis, which connects disability, race, and class, echoes the intent of Title VI. Her Functional Conflict Perspective calls for systems that not only avoid explicit discrimination but also dismantle embedded hierarchies of value in education, healthcare, and governance.

Whistleblower Protection Act (1989)

This act protects individuals who disclose government or institutional misconduct from retaliation. While Snow's work is not whistleblowing in the formal sense, it functions similarly by revealing systemic harm in state and professional systems. The act symbolizes a legal and ethical right to expose injustice. Autism in America embodies this principle through its truth-telling and systemic transparency.

Ongoing International Relevance: CRPD and UDHR

Globally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) reinforce the ideas central to Snow's

framework. Both documents affirm dignity, inclusion, and autonomy for all people. Though not fully ratified in the United States, their influence guides disability and human rights advocacy. Snow's trauma-informed and relational approach reflects these international norms, situating her work within a global human rights tradition.

Synthesis

Together, these laws form a coherent legal and ethical framework affirming that Autism in America is not only protected under constitutional speech and academic freedom but also aligned with U.S. civil rights and disability law. The book advances the moral intent of the ADA, IDEA, and Equal Protection Clause by extending them into emotional, relational, and cultural domains. Legally and ethically, its arguments for systemic healing and inclusion do not challenge the Constitution but rather fulfill its emancipatory spirit.

Appendix B

Autism in America as a Liberatory Framework: Evaluating Systemic Transformation Through Abolitionist and Decolonial Criteria

Isha Sarah Snow's *Autism in America: One Woman's Search for Healing* presents not only a personal narrative of neurodivergence and trauma but also a comprehensive critique of systemic coercion embedded in psychiatry, education, and governance. The relational frameworks, methods and social theories contained in this book will support and help to ensure the continued success of indigenous-led tribal restoration and decolonial efforts. When analyzed through the frameworks of Dean Spade, Rachel Herzing and Isaac Ontiveros, Mariame Kaba, and Peter Gelderloos, alongside Snow's own Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), the text transcends reformist discourse to become a blueprint for liberatory praxis. These frameworks collectively provide criteria for assessing whether a movement, or in this case, a social theory, advances genuine systemic freedom or merely reorients oppression into new forms.

Material Relief: Reframing Pathology as Access to Belonging

Dean Spade (2020) identifies the first criterion for a liberatory movement as whether it provides material relief to those most impacted by oppression. Spade defines this as meeting "real, immediate survival needs" rather than pursuing symbolic inclusion (Spade, 2020, p. 43). *Autism in America* fulfills this criterion by exposing how the pathologization of neurodivergence deprives individuals of access to care, education, and stability. By reframing autism as an evolutionary and relational intelligence rather than a deficit, Snow constructs a theoretical foundation for redistributing resources toward trauma-informed governance, inclusive education, and community interdependence.

Although the book does not offer direct financial or institutional reform, it creates the epistemic and moral infrastructure for material redistribution. As Spade argues, liberation cannot begin without addressing survival, but it must also challenge the “administrative violence” that structures need itself (Spade, 2015). In this sense, Snow’s work provides intellectual material relief by dismantling the ideologies that justify deprivation.

Inclusion and Centering of the Marginalized

Spade’s second criterion asks whether a movement leaves out or marginalizes the very people it purports to help. Snow’s text explicitly centers autistic, disabled, Indigenous, and survivor voices as epistemic authorities rather than objects of study. Drawing from Black feminist and decolonial scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Lila Abu-Lughod (2002), Snow resists the universalizing tendencies of Western psychology and anthropology. Her narrative positions lived experience as the locus of social theory, a move consistent with Mariame Kaba’s insistence that “we have to have difficult conversations” about harm, accountability, and belonging (Kaba, 2021, p. 18).

Rather than abstracting autism into diagnostic or economic categories, Snow situates it within the context of systemic trauma and historical violence, making visible those most often excluded from policy and theory alike. This satisfies Spade’s requirement that liberation must center the most marginalized, not the most assimilable (Spade, 2013).

Delegitimizing Oppressive Systems

The third criterion, whether a reform legitimizes or expands the systems that harm us, is where Snow’s analysis most strongly aligns with Herzing and Ontiveros’s abolitionist caution. Herzing (2015) warns against “reformist reforms” that “reorient and prolong” the life of oppressive institutions such as the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) by making them appear more humane. Autism in America directly resists this dynamic by refusing to “reform” psychiatry or education within existing frameworks. Instead, it calls for their transformation into relational, trauma-informed, and participatory systems of care.

Snow's critique of the biomedical model mirrors Foucault's (1977) notion of the "carceral continuum," in which institutions of care and punishment are structurally indistinguishable. Her analysis of psychiatric labeling as a mechanism of control dismantles the legitimacy of these systems by showing how they perpetuate hierarchy under the guise of treatment. This anti-legitimizing stance situates Autism in America within what Critical Resistance terms "non-reformist reform," a change that weakens, rather than strengthens, the state's coercive power (Ontiveros, 2019).

Mobilizing the Most Affected for Ongoing Struggle

Spade's fourth criterion, whether a movement mobilizes those most affected for ongoing struggle, is also satisfied in Snow's work. Rather than presenting theory as an academic endpoint, *Autism in America* functions as an organizing framework. Its proposed Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP) translates trauma theory, sociology, and systems thinking into tools for collective action and education. FCP encourages readers, especially neurodivergent and trauma-affected individuals, to view themselves as agents of systemic transformation rather than as patients of pathology.

This aligns with Spade's insistence that liberation must "build people's capacity to keep fighting" (Spade, 2013, p. 27). Similarly, Mariame Kaba (2021) reminds us that "abolition is a practice, not a destination," requiring ongoing relational and political engagement. Snow's open-source approach, collaborative authorship, and emphasis on co-regulation all exemplify this ongoing mobilization.

Exposing and Undermining Systems of Domination

From Peter Gelderloos's perspective, a movement's liberatory potential is measured by whether it exposes, confronts, or undermines the functions of state control (Gelderloos, 2007). Snow achieves this through epistemic resistance by redefining the very language that sustains domination. By revealing the linguistic violence of diagnostic and bureaucratic systems, she dismantles the legitimacy of state power over the psyche. Her analysis of "grammar as an instrument of hierarchy" parallels Gelderloos's argument that even nonviolent strategies can serve as

subversive weapons when they expose and delegitimize oppressive power.

In this sense, Autism in America operates as a form of nonviolent direct action through narrative. The act of writing becomes resistance, an assertion of agency that challenges epistemic colonization and the linguistic policing of identity.

Protected Speech and the Yates Standard

In assessing whether Autism in America might be considered subversive or radical within a legal framework, the precedent established in *Yates v. United States* (1957) provides critical context. In *Yates*, the Supreme Court ruled that advocating an abstract idea of revolution, such as discussing Marxist theory or the eventual overthrow of capitalism, constitutes protected speech under the First Amendment. Only advocacy of concrete action aimed at the imminent use of force or violence against the government falls outside constitutional protection (*Yates v. United States*, 354 U.S. 298, 1957).

When evaluated through this lens, Snow's work clearly falls within the realm of protected abstract advocacy. Autism in America advances a radical reimagining of governance, education, and economics through trauma-informed and relational frameworks, but it does not incite or endorse violent overthrow. Rather, its revolutionary potential is philosophical and cultural. It calls for the dismantling of coercive systems through collective consciousness, emotional regulation, and restorative policy design, not through insurrection or physical confrontation. Snow's vision of transformation, like that of Dean Spade (2020) and Mariame Kaba (2021), is one of nonviolent systemic evolution grounded in care, mutual aid, and relational accountability. Thus, by the Yates standard, Autism in America is not only legally protected but serves as an exemplar of radical speech that advances democratic inquiry rather than undermines it.

Difficult Conversations as Abolitionist Praxis

Mariame Kaba's concept of "difficult conversations" (Kaba, 2021) provides an essential interpretive lens. Kaba teaches that abolition requires us to confront discomfort, tell the truth about harm, and imagine

safety beyond punishment. Autism in America embodies this pedagogy by transforming trauma into dialogue. The author's willingness to publicly process grief, rage, and shame serves as a living example of relational accountability, what Kaba identifies as "the everyday practice of abolition" (p. 33).

The text's refusal to sanitize pain or separate the personal from the political situates it within Kaba's broader abolitionist pedagogy, where liberation begins with honesty about suffering and the courage to stay in relationship through conflict.

Avoiding the Reformist Trap

Herzing and Ontiveros's (2019) warning that "some reforms reorient and prolong the life of the PIC" applies equally to psychiatry, education, and welfare systems. Autism in America avoids this trap by refusing inclusionary politics. Rather than seeking representation within existing institutions, Snow calls for their metamorphosis into regenerative, relational systems. Her framework does not diversify power but dissolves it into cooperative interdependence, echoing what Gelderloos (2007) and Kaba (2021) both describe as prefigurative politics, the practice of building the new within the shell of the old.

Functional Conflict as a Mechanism of Healing

Through the Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP), Snow integrates abolitionist, psychological, and sociological frameworks into a coherent theory of healing. FCP reframes conflict as a self-regulating mechanism through which societies process trauma and restore balance. This view aligns with Kaba's and Spade's recognition that struggle itself can be restorative if it is oriented toward relationship rather than domination.

By transforming personal trauma into collective insight, Snow models conflict as feedback rather than failure, a principle echoed in both ecological and abolitionist traditions. In doing so, she bridges Peter Gelderloos's emphasis on disruption with Mariame Kaba's focus on repair, showing that both confrontation and compassion are necessary components of systemic regulation.

Conclusion: A Non-Reformist Reform of Consciousness

When evaluated through these intersecting frameworks, Autism in America meets all four of Dean Spade's criteria for liberatory movement-building. It provides material relief by redefining access to care, centers marginalized voices, delegitimizes oppressive systems, and mobilizes affected communities for ongoing struggle. It also fulfills Herzing and Ontiveros's demand to resist reforms that reorient oppression, enacts Kaba's ethic of relational truth-telling, and satisfies Gelderloos's imperative to undermine systems of domination.

In the language of Critical Resistance, Snow's project is a non-reformist reform, a work that reduces harm now while building capacity for abolition later. In the language of Mariame Kaba, it is "a series of difficult conversations that make new worlds possible." And in the language of the Functional Conflict Perspective, it represents the next phase of social evolution, transforming pain into coherence and conflict into collective healing.

Glossary of Key Terms

Affirmative Action

A policy or set of practices designed to counteract systemic discrimination by actively promoting inclusion of marginalized groups in employment, education, and other institutions. In this book, it is reimagined through a neurodivergent lens, calling for structural accommodations and communication justice.

Ableism

A belief system and structural bias that devalues people with disabilities or differences in neurological functioning. It enforces a standard of “normalcy” that marginalizes those who diverge from it.

Bottom-Up Processing

A sensory-first way of perceiving the world where individuals build meaning from concrete details toward conceptual understanding. Common in neurodivergent cognition, it contrasts with top-down (rule-based, abstract-first) processing, and is central to rethinking how communication and learning are structured.

Childism

A systemic bias that devalues children and their ways of knowing. Similar to racism or sexism, childism operates by assuming children are less worthy of autonomy, respect, or truth. It manifests in adult-centric systems of control and punishment.

Colonization

A systemic process through which one group exerts control over another politically, culturally, spiritually, and economically by severing people from their land, language, kinship systems, and ways of knowing. Colonization is not just a historical event but an ongoing structure that fragments identity, imposes hierarchy, and enforces obedience through both visible force and invisible norms.

In this book, colonization is understood as a relational rupture, a collective trauma that disconnects individuals and communities from ancestral belonging, emotional attunement, and ecological reciprocity. It operates not only through physical conquest but through institutions like psychiatry, education, governance, and language, which continue to encode colonial logic by pathologizing difference and rewarding assimilation.

Decolonization, then, is not simply a reversal of power, but a restoration of relational integrity and a re-rooting in community, interdependence, and the living memory of what was stolen but never entirely lost.

Co-Regulation

A relational process in which one nervous system helps regulate another. Essential for emotional development and healing, especially in children or trauma survivors. Contrasts with the myth of “self-regulation” as an isolated internal task.

Cultural Scripts

Socially constructed patterns of behavior, language, and expectation that are often unconscious but deeply shape identity and belonging. This book explores how dominant cultural scripts silence difference and enforces conformity.

Decolonization

More than a political demand or academic trend, decolonization is a relational process of remembering, restoring, and re-rooting. It is the act of undoing the psychological, cultural, linguistic, and structural imprints of colonization both within society and within the self.

Decolonization is not simply about transferring power from one group to another; it is about dismantling the logic of domination itself. This includes rejecting binaries, breaking down artificial hierarchies, and re-centering knowledge systems rooted in reciprocity, collective care, and ecological balance.

In this book, decolonization is framed as an act of healing and re-integration. It involves reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing, validating neurodivergent perception, restoring intergenerational memory, and

rebuilding systems that honor emotional truth, ancestral wisdom, and interdependence. It is not a metaphor but a lived, ongoing commitment to unlearning what colonization taught us to forget.

Deficit Model

A framework in education, mental health, and policy that views individuals through what they lack rather than what they contribute. This model fuels stigma, pathologization, and coercion, especially for disabled or neurodivergent people.

Ego-European

A term coined by author Lorenzo Kamel and used in this book to describe the dominant cognitive and cultural orientation of Western, colonial, and industrialized societies, particularly those shaped by Enlightenment-era European values. Ego-European consciousness is characterized by individualism, hierarchical reasoning, linear logic, binary thinking, and the prioritization of control over connection.

This mindset emphasizes ego as a separate, bounded self and often views emotions, bodies, children, and Indigenous or divergent knowledge systems as “irrational” or “primitive.” It underpins the systems that fragment relationality, from psychiatry and education to law and language, and reinforces the illusion of separation between mind and body, self and other, human and Earth.

In contrast, this book calls for a shift toward relational cognition and re-indigenized epistemologies, which center co-regulation, nonlinearity, mutuality, and collective well-being. The term Ego-European is not used as a racial descriptor, but as a cultural critique of a worldview that has become hegemonic and harmful through its global exportation and institutionalization.

Functional Conflict Perspective (FCP)

A social theory introduced in this book that integrates functionalism and conflict theory with trauma-informed systems thinking. FCP views conflict not as failure, but as a self-regulating mechanism that signals disconnection and an opportunity for repair. For a more in-depth

explanation please visit my blogs at my consulting page, Spirolateral.org, and my Sub Stack account.

Linguistic Exclusion

The systemic silencing or marginalization of people based on how they speak, process, or use language. Neurodivergent, non-native, and culturally divergent communicators are often excluded from access, authority, or credibility due to unconscious language bias.

Mirror Integration Theory (MIT)

A psycho-sociological theory developed in this book that proposes a reciprocal relationship between individual and collective healing. It holds that personal dysfunction often reflects societal dysfunction, and vice versa. Healing, then, must be both internal and structural. For a more in-depth explanation, please visit Spirolateral.org

Neurodivergence

A term describing natural variations in brain function, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other non-normative cognitive experiences. It challenges the notion of a single “normal” brain and embraces diversity as necessary for innovation, resilience, and social evolution.

Pathologization

The process of labeling natural human differences or adaptive responses as illnesses or disorders. Often applied to survivors of trauma, neurodivergent people, or children who resist conformity.

Polyvagal Theory

A neurobiological framework that explains how the vagus nerve regulates safety, connection, and survival responses. Central to understanding trauma, shutdown, and co-regulation in both individuals and groups.

Relational Epistemology

A way of knowing that centers connection, context, and co-existence rather than isolation, objectivity, or hierarchy. It informs this book’s approach to healing, learning, and systems change.

Relational-Indigenous

A term to counter Ego-European that describes a worldview and way of being that centers relationship over domination, interdependence over isolation, and responsibility over control. Rooted in many Indigenous knowledge systems across the globe, Relational-Indigenous consciousness honors the interconnectedness of all beings, human, more-than-human, ancestral, and ecological, and holds that healing and knowing emerge through relationship, reciprocity, and respect.

This worldview is non-linear, embodied, and emotionally attuned. It often resists binaries and embraces paradox, silence, and ceremony as legitimate ways of knowing. Rather than fragmenting cognition into categories like “rational” and “irrational,” it sees intelligence as situated within kinship systems, ecosystems, and the natural flow of life.

In contrast to the extractive and hierarchical logic of Ego-European frameworks, Relational-Indigenous thought does not seek to control or categorize, but to listen, respond, and remain accountable to the whole. While not monolithic across cultures, many Indigenous traditions share this fundamental orientation toward life as relational rather than mechanistic.

This book draws on Relational-Indigenous principles as both critique and remedy, offering them not as a romanticized ideal, but as living invitations to remember what colonization, capitalism, and coercive institutions have tried to sever.

Relational Re-rooting

A practice and philosophy of returning to connection with self, others, ancestry, and Earth. It is not a regression, but a re-integration of what colonial and capitalist systems have fragmented. The central metaphor of this book’s conclusion.

Reverse Dominance Hierarchy

A leadership model found in many Indigenous societies that prevents coercive authority by diffusing power across relational networks. It is proposed here as a counter-structure to imposed hierarchies and institutional domination.

Self-Regulation (Myth of)

The belief that individuals should independently control their emotions and behavior, often used to justify withdrawal of support. In this book, self-regulation is reframed as an outcome of co-regulation and relational safety, not a personal failing.

Social Contract (Broken)

Refers to the implicit agreements and expectations that hold society together. When language, systems, and institutions exclude or harm, the social contract is no longer mutual. This book asks what new contracts could be forged through trust, inclusion, and restoration.

Systemic Trauma

Harm that arises not from isolated events, but from long-standing patterns of violence, neglect, or suppression within social systems: education, law, medicine, family. Healing systemic trauma requires collective re-visioning and structural change.

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About the Author

Isha Sarah Snow (she/her, they/them) is an Autistic Sociologist and trauma-informed neurodivergent researcher, writer, and advocate for systemic transformation. As a late-diagnosed autistic woman, mother, and scholar, their work developing Autistic Standpoint Theory weaves lived experience with sociological insight, decolonial theory, and neurodivergent wisdom. Their essays challenge institutional narratives around autism, education, mental health, and justice, calling for a collective reimagining of what it means to be human in a fragmented world.

As part of their active and ongoing recovery plan, they began pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology with a minor in Anthropology at Washington State University Vancouver in 2025, where they maintain a near perfect GPA and are known for their pioneering work on the intersection of language, neurodivergence, and trauma. Snow hopes to continue alchemizing their lived experiences into wisdom to share with others and plans to focus their education studying the intersection of Cognitive Science, Eco Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology as they pursue their Master's degree. While in school, they post essays and other thoughts regularly to their Substack community.

Snow is the recipient of numerous academic honors and scholarships, including the 2024 All-Washington Academic Team Award from Phi Beta Kappa, the President's Award from Lower Columbia College which provided a tuition waiver to attend Washington State University in Vancouver, the city of Vancouver's Rotary Club Scholarship, a WWIN Star Scholar for 2025-2026, and was also awarded two earlier scholarships from the Robert and Margaret Pulliam Endowment and the Wahkiakum Community Foundation. They are also a member of the national Honors Society and serve on the boards of both their local community's Youth Advocacy Coalition and the Area on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington.

Their writing diagnoses a wounded world and in doing so, illuminates a pathway to collective healing. The research included in this book has been previously presented at academic symposiums for several universities including Central Washington University and WSU, is published across various interdisciplinary platforms, and covers topics such

as relationships, healing from personal and generational trauma, bottom-up communication, childism, eugenics in psychiatry, and the decolonization of mental health through language reclamation. They are also excited to present their intersectional studies and learned experiences with the Cultural Autism Studies at Yale (CASY). For future speaking engagements or any other inquiries please email Snow at pandemicnova@gmail.com



“Part of being a revolutionary is creating a vision that is more humane... more loving. It’s really working to create something beautiful.”
— Assata Shakur

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