

Why Addressing the Over-Representation of First Nations Children in Care Requires New Theoretical Approaches Based on First Nations Ontology?

Cindy Blackstock, Ph.D.
First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

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Abstract

First Nations children have been dramatically over-represented in the Canadian child welfare system for more than 50 years. As western theoretical approaches have not successfully informed effective interventions to address the problem, this article suggests that new theories based on First Nations ontology and western physics may be more promising. The discussion begins with a general exploration of First Nations and western ontology before analyzing ecological theory, structural theory, and anti-oppressive approaches in the context of First Nations child welfare. The article goes on to suggest that physics' theory of everything more closely approximates First Nations ontology and provides a framework for the presentation of a new First Nations theory called the breath of life theory, which will be fully presented in a future article.

Key Words: First Nations, ontology, culture, science, theory

Introduction

Fifty years after western¹ social work² began imposing its child protection systems³ on the 633 First Nations⁴ communities in Canada, there are more First Nations children in state care today than at any point in history, including during residential school operations (Blackstock, 2003; Assembly of First Nations, 2007). The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) estimates that there are more than 27,000 First Nations children in child welfare care, representing about 30 percent to 40 percent of all children in care, even though First Nations children compose less than 5 percent of

¹ Describes the general characteristics of Canadian society influenced by British and French cultures

² Describes the overall profession of social work, including child protection services

³ Describes statutory protections provided by the state, or a state delegated authority, to respond to child maltreatment

⁴ Describes indigenous peoples in Canada who self-identify as First Nations.

the overall child population (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003; Blackstock, 2003; Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Assembly of First Nations, 2007). The Auditor General of Canada (2008) suggests that First Nations children are eight times more likely to come into child welfare care than other children. Two previous cycles of the Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) found that First Nations children were not over-represented among reports of abuse but were more than twice as likely to be reported for neglect than non-Aboriginal children (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004; Trocmé, MacLaurin, Fallon, Knoke, Pitman, & McCormack, 2006). In unpacking neglect, CIS researchers drew a relationship between structural factors such as poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse with the over-representation of First Nations children among substantiated neglect cases (Nelson, Landsman, Cross, Tyler, Twohig, & Allen, 1994; Blackstock, Trocmé, & Bennett, 2004; Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Trocmé et al., 2006). Despite the growing evidence that structural factors play a key role in the over-representation of First Nations children in child welfare, there is very little theoretical work relevant to First Nations. Social science theories frequently applied to First Nations child welfare such as ecological theory, structural theory, and anti-oppressive frameworks are imbued with western cultural preferences for reductionism, individuality, and determinism that do not easily interface with First Nations ontology or bridge the gap between the source of structural risk and its manifestation among disadvantaged groups (Blackstock, 2007a). As ontology and theory are intrinsically linked (Archer, 1995), this article contrasts the general characteristics of First Nations and western ontology before moving on to examine the cultural validity of three western theories within a First Nations child welfare context. The article ends by suggesting that the assumptions of western physics' theory of everything more closely approximate First Nations ontology than contemporary social science theories. These discussions set the context for the proposition of a new theoretical framework, called the "breath of life" theory, based on First Nations ontology and physics' theory of everything (TOE), which will appear in a future article.

First Nations and Western Ontology: The Shaping of Theory

Despite the diversity of First Nations cultures in Canada, there are several common differences between First Nations and the general character of western ontology: (1) First Nations believe their ancestors were right about most things (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992; Assembly of First Nations, 1993; Auger, 2001), and westerners believe their ancestors were either mostly wrong or

their ideas could be substantially improved upon (Postman,1993; Wright, 2005); (2) First Nations believe in an indivisible reality, whereas westerners believe in a reductionist and deterministic reality (Blackstock, 2007b; Cross, 2007); (3) First Nations knowledge is situated within more expansive concepts of space, dimensions of reality, and time (Campbell & Moyers, 1991; Auger, 2001; Blackstock, 2007b); (4) First Nations ontology and science are constructed as part of the natural world (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992; Assembly of First Nations, 1993; Auger, 2001), whereas western culture largely views human experience as separate from the natural world (Postman, 1993); (5) First Nations believe in multiple dimensions of reality, whereas western culture tends to focus on only the observable dimension of reality (Greene, 2003; Blackstock, 2007b; Kaku, 2006); and (6) First Nations believe there are sufficient resources to meet everyone's needs (T. Cross, personal communication , January 19, 2009), whereas westerners focus on a scarcity of resources primarily driven by a conflation of want and need (Campbell & Moyers, 1991; Postman, 1993).

One of the most fundamental differences between First Nations and non- Aboriginal ontology relates to concepts of time. First Nations believe in expansive concepts of time in which the past, present, and future are mutually influencing, whereas western culture focuses on the present and, to a lesser extent, on the future. In terms of children, First Nations often consider their actions in terms of the impacts of the “seven generations.” This means that actions are informed by the experience of past generations and by considering the consequences for the seven generations to follow (Assembly of First Nations, 1993). If western child welfare followed First Nations ontology, it would need to assess child maltreatment based on the ancestral experience of the child and actively consider the consequences of intervention on the subsequent seven generations of children. This simply does not happen in any meaningful way in western child welfare.

The same pattern is apparent in western theories. Although western theories such as ecological theory and complexity theory include concepts of time, they are limited to one life cycle and are, therefore, not as expansive as the seven generation concept. Another fundamental difference that should be emphasized pertains to the western child welfare cultural bias toward one dimension of reality. In the main, western child welfare defines reality as that which is seen and experienced, relegating other dimensions of reality to fictitious or futuristic status. First Nations

believe in multiple dimensions of reality, some of which are based on legend, but many are considered nonfictional. Although it varies by culture, First Nations usually access alternate dimensions of reality using spiritual and/or ritualistic ceremonies (Blackstock, 2003) and use the information gleaned to inform life experience and decision making.

In general terms, the world looks much different from the western perspective. Western ontology typically proclaims those who came before as either mostly wrong or less developed; contemporary and futuristic knowledge are highly valued, and the past is usually only relevant as a starting point for creating better knowledge (Campbell & Moyers, 1991; Postman, 1993; Wright, 2005). The western bias toward individual rights and reductionism segments knowledge into a series of different and discrete theoretical models applied to child welfare with little tolerance for plurality of perspective (Lather, 2006). For example, feminism, critical theory, positivism, and modernity all explore reality using different lenses, but they exist like single flashlight beams in a dark room. Sometimes the beams cross each other, but little attention is paid to the intersections or unlit areas. Instead, the holder of the flashlight tends to see only those things enlightened by the narrow epistemological beam (Blackstock, 2007b). Some epistemological approaches in social work acknowledge interconnections, such as the ecological model and structural theory, but even these theories bracket the time frames and dimensions of reality (Blackstock, 2007b).

Several authors have tried to collapse western social science theories to try to account for interconnected phenomena, but there is no accepted process for combining social work theories. Nor is there often much reflection by authors about the symbiosis, tensions, and gaps created when different theories are combined (Houston, 2002; McCurdy & Daro, 2002; Ventegodt, Merrick, & Anderson, 2003).

The impact of ontological differences can be seen when comparing child welfare organizations run by First Nations versus non-Aboriginal peoples. For example, Blackstock and Trocmé (2005) found that First Nations child welfare agencies were more likely to take a community development approach to child safety, drawing on ancestral knowledge, than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. It is important to note that there is no evidence that child safety is less valued within the First Nations community development model than in the western model that focuses primarily on the manifestation and intervention of risk at the level of the child. Rather, differing worldviews suggest different starting points for dealing with the risk. For First Nations,

the assumption is that if communities are well, families do better and are able to keep their children safe. For western social work, individual families can keep their children safe with adequate services.

The differences between western and First Nations ontology are so vast in dimension, scope, and value that they cannot be substituted for one another without significant impact to the theoretical model or question under study. They can, however, bring very different and valuable perspectives to the same phenomena, opening up new pathways of understanding and intervention in child welfare and other fields.

Cross Cultural Validity of Western Theories to First Nations Child Welfare

Despite all of the challenges, many child welfare social workers remain wedded to western social work theories when working with First Nations peoples while continuing to exclude or marginalize First Nations alternatives. This section briefly evaluates three of the most common western theoretical approaches applied to First Nations child welfare--ecological theory, anti-oppressive approaches, and structural theory--from a First Nations perspective to judge their merits in: 1) cross cultural validity, 2) capacity to respond to structural child welfare risk, and 3) testability. The limitations of western social science theories in a First Nations child welfare context open space for the later discussion of theoretical alternatives that more closely reflect First Nations ontology.

Ecological Theory

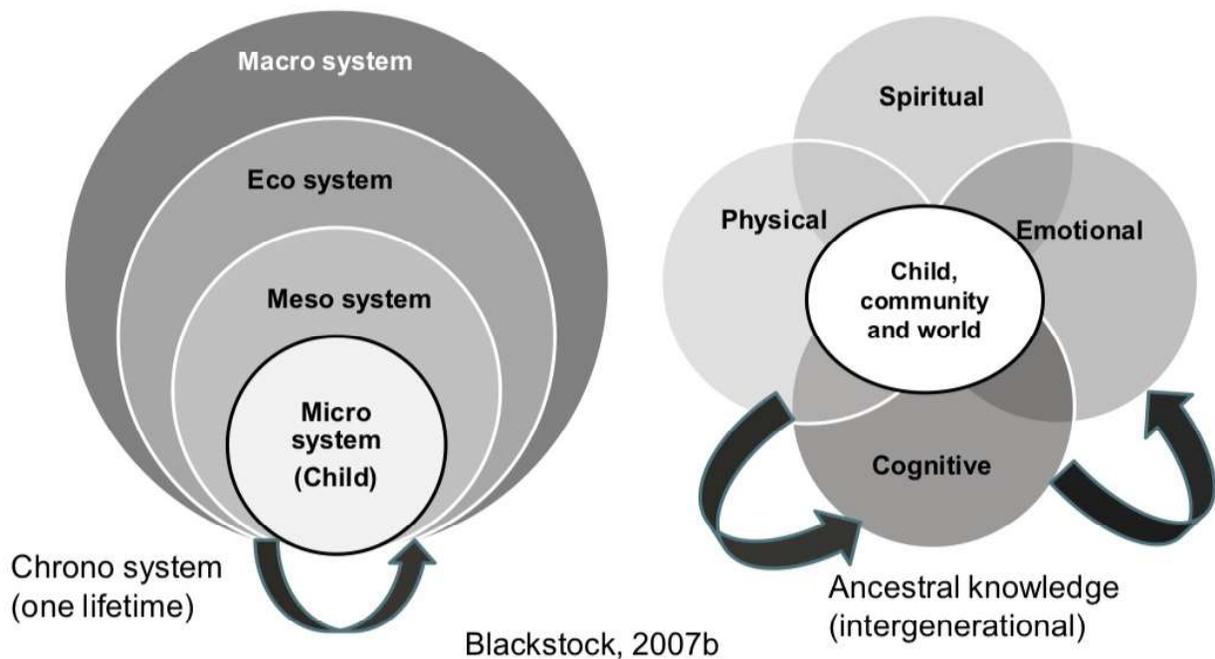
Rooted in developmental psychology, ecological theory was one of the earliest theoretical approaches applied to First Nations peoples in Canada (Ungar, 2002). Some believe that ecological theory is particularly well suited to First Nations' holistic worldview, as it situates individual experience within the nested layers of community and societal experience (Ungar, 2002). But as McGregor (2005) notes, indigenous peoples have been reluctant to reduce indigenous knowledge to the fit within the western ontological limitations of ecological theory.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed four different layers of experience that have an impact on individuals: 1) the microsystem, which has an immediate and persistent impact on the individual, such as family, neighbors, and workplace; 2) the mesosystem, which connects micro system environments, such as family and workplace; 3) the exosystem, including external environments that tangentially affect the individual, such as school boards or proximal neighborhoods; and 4)

the macrosystem, encompassing broader societal culture and context. Bronfenbrenner (1989) later added time as a dimension of the model by including the chronosystem to reflect patterns of change over the life course.

Figure 1 shows how differences in time and ancestral knowledge, values, and beliefs play out when the ecological model is viewed from western and First Nations ontological perspectives.

Figure 1: Ecological theory viewed from the perspective of Indigenous ontology
Western Worldview **Indigenous Worldview**



Under the western ecological approach, the child is seen in a fixed moment in time within a larger interconnected context of family and world. Although the concept of the chronosystem captures experience across the life cycle of a child, it does not consider ancestral knowledge. If a First Nations epistemology is applied, the child, family, community, and world are wholly affected by four interconnected dimensions of knowledge (emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical) informed by ancestral knowledge, which is to be passed to future generations in perpetuity (Assembly of First Nations, 1993; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Blackstock, 2007b).

Overall, ecological theory is primarily descriptive in nature. It acts like a theoretical zoom lens, allowing the viewer to see how one individual is nested within different layers of his or her environment. From a child welfare perspective, it is often very helpful to think of children within the social spheres that influence them particularly, given the growing evidence that structural risks located outside of the family can increase risk for maltreatment. However, ecological theory does not provide a clear pathway for identifying or responding to structural risks affecting intergenerational groups of disadvantaged children. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) also does not specifically propose a null hypothesis for his theory or propose the development of measures for the micro, meso, macro and chronosystems. These limitations, coupled with the questionable cultural validity of the model, compromise its value in a First Nations child welfare context.

Structural Theory

Structural social work theory focuses on the influence of societal inequality and power differentials on the systemic marginalization of certain individuals or groups (Mullaly, 1997, 2007; Baskin, 2002). Structural theory advocates a societal change perspective in order to mediate inequality (Mullaly, 1997, 2007) but it does not explicitly define or measure structural risk, nor does it set out a way of exploring the intersection between structural risks and the experience of individuals or groups across dimensions of reality or time (Blackstock, 2007b).

On the face of it, structural theory seems to lend itself well to dealing with the child welfare structural risks faced by First Nations children and families in child welfare, but despite its promise, it has substantially failed to influence the plight of First Nations children coming into contact with the child welfare system in Canada. As Baskin (2002) argues, structural theory is consistent with a First Nations worldview in that it does zoom out from the experience of risk at an individual level to explore the sources of that risk at a societal level. However, the overall cross cultural validity of the model in a First Nations context is limited, given its primary focus on structural issues and not accounting for ancestral knowledge, intersections between realities, or interconnections to other phenomena.

Bob Mullaly (2007), a leading structural theorist, differentiates structural theory from ecological and systems theory approaches, suggesting the latter are too general to be tested, falsely presume the overall goodness of societal systems, and are primarily descriptive, giving little attention to suggesting remedies to identified oppression. I agree with Mullaly's critique, but he

leaves readers with the impression that structural theory is distinguished from the others on these points. I find little evidence of this.

Like ecological theory, structural theory provides an important vantage point for the analysis of structural risk, but it does not specifically define structural risks in a way that they can be measured or tested, nor does it account for how structural risks interact with each other and with other dimensions of experience at a societal level. As it currently exists, structural theory does not adequately address the experience of First Nations children in child welfare.

Anti-Oppressive Approaches

Anti-oppressive social work (AOP) is a broad, sweeping set of practices and approaches that are intended to free the potential of each person and honor diversity with a particular focus on addressing structural oppression arising from power imbalances between individuals and groups (Williams, 1999). Although AOP is broadly respected and practiced in Canadian child welfare, there is little evidence to suggest it is effective when applied to First Nations child welfare.

Frankly, the plurality of the approach coupled with the lack of specificity of definition makes it difficult to empirically evaluate the model even in western applications, let alone to evaluate its cross cultural validity in a First Nations context. AOP's centrism on oppression raises important questions about its validity when set against First Nations ontological beliefs in an indivisible reality in which oppression would form only one perspective on experience-- not the defining one. AOP also does not explicitly account for differences in First Nations ontological value of ancestral knowledge, concepts of time, interconnection with other dimensions of reality, or references to the natural world.

It is difficult to evaluate these ontological differences within the context of First Nations child welfare, because there is no historical evidence that the anti-oppressive social work movement engaged in any widespread or sustained action in the area. For example, the historical record shows no evidence that AOP social workers protested against residential schools throughout their 100 years of operations ending in 1996, nor have they mobilized to address the vast over-representation of First Nations children in care today (Blackstock, 2007a).

In addition to the questions about AOP's cross cultural validity to First Nations, other factors that may further erode AOP efficacy in responding to the oppression experienced by First Nations include: 1) the tendency for social workers to be employed in bureaucracies that reinforce

standardization and conformity to institutional norms, thereby muting social justice activities (Bauman, 1989); 2) social work motivations to feel good by doing good can serve to usurp constituents' right to self-determination and the right to define the "good" (Milloy, 2005); and 3) a lack of pragmatic ways to deal with widespread systemic risk, once it is identified.

As an approach to First Nations child welfare, it may be an interesting lens, but it is not robust or comprehensive enough to meet the challenge of informing new approaches to deal with structural risk factors affecting First Nations.

Western Theories: Parts of the Whole?

One of the most pronounced features binding First Nations knowledge and the theory of everything is that all reality across time and space are interconnected. Social work theories are often segmented in terms of population (e.g., feminism, anti-oppressive practice, and queer theory), scope (e.g., structural theory and anti-oppressive approaches), or in time (e.g., ecological theory and complexity theory), but little thought has been given as to whether or not these theoretical frameworks are themselves only components of an all-encompassing theory of humanity. It is with regard to this theoretical question that First Nations knowledge has the most to contribute to social work, because First Nations peoples have lived according to a master set of unification principles that bind all reality, time, and life for millennia.

Creating Space for First Nations Ontology and Epistemology in Child Welfare

Given that western child welfare approaches informed by western ways of knowing are not robust enough to address the cultural and contextual realities facing First Nations children in child welfare (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Absolon & Willett, 2004; Trocmé et al., 2004), how do First Nations approaches get re-centered in the social science theoretical discourse?

It begins by challenging assumptions that Lather (2006) typifies in her description of non-western epistemologies as "born of the interstices of dominant discourses" (p. 45). There are two problematic assumptions here: 1) that undiscovered epistemological approaches are new instead of newly recognized by western-dominated knowledge and knowledge institutions, and 2) that these new or newly recognized approaches only fill in the gaps of western knowledge rather than setting out a whole new process of knowledge or emphasis on a dimension of knowledge that western epistemology has not considered. This type of epistemological bracketing would

admonish First Nations epistemologies to fill in the gaps in social work knowledge. The dissimilarity between First Nations and western epistemologies suggests differences on the dimensional scale not at the shorelines and by confining what Lather (2006) terms new epistemologies, she misses an opportunity to explore multiple epistemological positions that go beyond the boundaries of western thought (Blackstock, 2007b). Fawcett and Hearn (2004) also describe the challenges of researching the other, but they do not necessarily introduce a strategy for understanding the epistemologies of the other on the other's own terms. Rather, they introduce western-based critical theory as a framework for building this understanding. In effect, they advocate using an outsider epistemological framework to understand the insider, something they discuss in other parts of their article as being problematic because it distorts understanding (Blackstock, 2007b).

The cultural mismatch between research epistemology, methods, and research participants is fraught with problems (Smith, 1999; Kovach, 2007). For example, when the gold standard of western research, the randomized control trial, is applied to First Nations knowledge, it fails. At best, randomized control trials describe a phenomenon in relation to a bracketed number of variables and in a defined period of time. Even when replicated, a control trial is usually limited to exploring relationships between variables identified in the source study and, thus, may miss the influence of unexplored variables or changes of context over long periods of time. For example, one need look no further than the pharmaceutical industry to see how randomized clinical trials suggesting a drug is safe and beneficial can over time prove to be harmful when the long-term effects of the drug or its interactions with unintended variables become apparent. Qualitative social work research methods offer some similarity to First Nations ontology, but they too are imbued with western concepts and so may not be suitable for exploring questions situated within expansive concepts of time, dimensions of reality, or interconnected realities (Blackstock, 2007b).

First Nations research methods are also limited by their ontological viewpoint. For example, First Nations methods of storytelling would not necessarily be the best approach for understanding truly new phenomena from which no prior history or knowledge can be drawn. First Nations and western ontology, theory, and research methods should not be rank ordered in terms of their implicit value, but rather should be measured against the nature and context of the question and population under study. By drawing on the richness of these diverse ontological standpoints

and those offered by other cultures, we can significantly expand our efficacy in all fields of academic study and human understanding.

Unfortunately, the current reality in many schools of social work in Canada is that western ontology, epistemology, and research methods practically remain the only choice recognized as legitimate on the academic menu. In some ways, it is not surprising, given the colonial context in which Canadian social work has developed. Western social work, and its derivative research, struggles to understand First Nations ways of caring for children and has not in most cases even acknowledged that First Nations peoples have well-developed knowledge and knowledge-building systems on the subject, let alone invested any time learning about them (Cross & Blackstock, 2005). By assuming vacancy of knowledge in First Nations cultures, western-based social work applies its distorting concepts on First Nations (Blackstock, 2007b). This extends to the overreliance on western theoretical paradigms by social workers to explore the experience of First Nations peoples.

Given that western social work theories are inadequate for exploring structural issues in a First Nations child welfare context, then what about theories from western sciences? Is it possible that, as social work was often judging the pure sciences for being too reductionist to apply to human experience, the pure sciences were busy capturing a view of reality that approximates First Nations ontology to a degree that social work has not even contemplated?

Symbiosis Between Western Physics and First Nations Ontology

Is the theoretical whole of human experience really just a sum of its parts? First Nations ontology suggests that people are interconnected with the universe, the natural world, and each other—across time and dimensions of reality. First Nations believe the whole can be understood only as an interconnected reality governed by a set of simple principles that must be in balance to achieve optimal balance for individuals and groups in the system. In effect, First Nations believe that western theories of parts of things are false realities and, instead, what should be pursued is the understanding human existence within the context of a unified theory. First Nations are not alone in favoring a unified theory of nature; many disciplines in western science are actively investigating the same.

Although unified theories of reality have been recorded in western thought dating back to ancient Greece, Einstein was the first person to seriously contemplate a theory of everything in

science when he succeeded in drawing a relationship between Sir Isaac Newton's notion of gravity and electromagnetic force and developed the theory of relativity (Falk, 2002; Isaacson, 2007). The theory of relativity unites these forces by suggesting that the universe is composed of a space-time fabric that contours under the pressure of large masses, such as planets, thus creating gravity. It turned out that in the cosmos, both of these forces operated in a predictable and interdependent manner in what would later be termed the "world of the big" (Public Broadcasting Corporation, 2003). This inspired Einstein and others to see if general relativity could bond with quantum mechanics in what was then termed the unified theory or the theory of everything.

Einstein's quest for a unified theory was cast into doubt when quantum mechanics physicists revealed that subatomic particles--the world of the small--operated in a highly unpredictable manner (Falk, 2002; Greene, 2003). Quantum mechanics basically suggests that specific subatomic outcomes cannot be predicted as a result of the unpredictable behavior of individual particles; the best one can do is predict the probability of an outcome. Quantum mechanics proved so accurate under scientific study that it cast serious doubt amongst physicists that marrying the unpredictable world of quantum mechanics with Einstein's predictable physical world of cosmology would ever be possible. Einstein was unshaken by the skeptics and pursued the theory of everything to the time of his death, despite the professional segregation that came with studying what was then viewed as improbable (Isaacson, 2007).

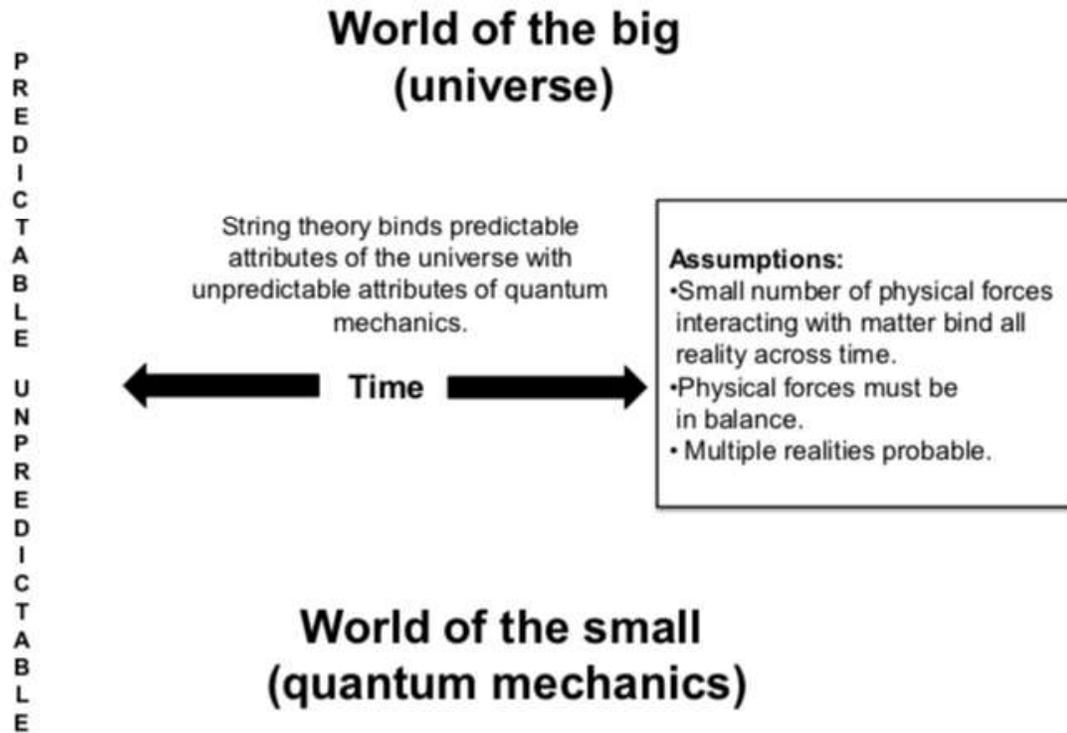
The puzzle of marrying Einstein's predictable world of the big with the unpredictable quantum mechanics world of the small was so ominous that mainstream physics largely ignored the question for several decades. There were, however, a small number of theory of everything devotees who continued to focus on the intersection between the world of the big and the world of the small, and this gave rise to string theory. Early TOE theorists believed that the same principles that gave rise to the harmonized universe could also explain the erratic behavior of particles in quantum mechanics (Falk, 2002). This belief was fuelled by studies of black holes. Black holes form when a small but very heavy and dense particle (relevant to quantum mechanics) is set on the space-time fabric (relevant to cosmology), creating a very sharp contour in a "V shape" versus more of a wave shape normally created by planets. This phenomenon sets Einstein's theory of relativity in play as the gravitational pull created by the deep and sharp imprint on the space-time fabric is so strong it draws everything into it, including light (Hawking, 1988, 2005). Because

black holes can only be created when something very small but large in mass penetrates the space-time fabric, there had to be some mechanism to bind the physical principles of quantum mechanics and cosmology. It turned out that Einstein could be right after all (Hawking, 1988).

String theory is physics' answer to how the world of the big (cosmology) and the world of the small (quantum mechanics) can be married together. It suggests a way in which the erratic behavior of individual particles can be harmonized to a degree such that the physical principles are compatible with those governing the universe. Before string theory, most physicists thought that the smallest subatomic particles existed as independent units, which created conditions for relatively free and unpredictable movement. String theory basically rejects this idea. Instead, subatomic particles exist as strings that moderate the movements of individual particles in such a way that they become more predictable and can therefore be united with the world of the big (Falk, 2002). In the same way, we moderate unpredictable behaviors of children by stringing them together with family and community. String theorists further propose that varying vibrations of strings gives rise to different types of matter and energy (Greene, 2003), in the same way that culture and context gives rise to the rich diversity of human experience.

After years of refinement, string theorists eliminated the mathematical anomalies plaguing earlier designs achieving mathematical and theoretical balance between the world of the big and the world of the small, thus paving the way for the unified theory of everything (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Physics' theory of everything



Physics' pursuit of TOE suggests a number of things about reality:

- Only about 4 percent of all matter is visible, suggesting that a study of reality based only on what can be seen would be extremely limited (European Organization for Nuclear Research [CERN], 2008).
- There are multiple dimensions of reality, also known as *degrees of freedom*—four of which we can observe in everyday life and six or seven of which cannot be seen (Greene, 2003; Public Broadcasting Corporation, 2003; Kaku, 2006).
- All reality is formed in strings of particles (in circles or strands or circles and strands), and variations in string vibrations give rise to different forms of matter and energy (Falk, 2002; Greene, 2003).
- There are 18 numeric constants of nature known as the standard model. Each constant has a precise value, and when these values are altered, the universe as we know it will cease to exist (Greene, 2003; Oerter, 2006).
- Although the standard model is very robust, it does not explain all matter and energy in the universe, and thus there is ongoing work to achieve a true Theory of Everything (Hawking, 2005; European Organization for Nuclear Research, 2008).

Some have suggested that string theory should not be considered a true scientific theory, because strings are not visible using current technology, and thus the theory cannot be disproved using

contemporary technology (Woit, 2006; Cartwright & Frigg, 2007). They are right in a literal sense, in that science has not evolved to a point at which the existence of strings can be confirmed, but string theory does at least posit a plausible test for the theory-- if strings do not exist, the theory is wrong. String theory advocates suggest that it is reasonable to believe that technology capable of seeing strings will be available in the foreseeable future (Kaku, 2006). Moreover, they argue the sophisticated mathematical balance in string theory is very unlikely to be achieved in error and that “fingerprints” of strings, such as the Higgs Boson particle, will be detectable as new technologies are employed, such as the large hadron collider (LHC) that just began operations in Switzerland (Cartwright & Frigg, 2007; European Organization for Nuclear Research, 2008; Quigg, 2008). Discounting a theory solely on the basis that available technology cannot conduct a reliable test would be ill advised. If this same thinking had applied in Newton’s time, then his law of gravity would have never gotten off the ground. It is critical that any proposed theory has a strong evidence base and a plausible way of being disproved. These are characteristics that too many social work theories simply fall short on.

There is something else at work as well, relating to the question of why an empirical science like physics can investigate the creation of the universe when it occurred more than 13.7 billion years ago (Falk, 2002). Some believe that there is no way science can empirically investigate something that happened so long ago, charging that such an endeavor rings more of philosophy than science. This same argument is often leveraged at First Nations ancestral knowledge.

In studying the origins of the universe, physicists were challenged to find empirical evidence of an event that happened billions of years before. That empirical evidence is found in starlight. The longevity of starlight allows physicists to better understand the characteristics of the universe across time. Similarly, understanding First Nations oral history allows one to chronicle child caring values and practices over multiple generations. Oral history is the oral preservation of knowledge, values, and practices within a cultural group. For the evidence suggesting that First Nations oral history is valid, one need look no further than the detailed study and ruling made by the Supreme Court of Canada in the historic Delgamuuk case, in which the Court ruled that the oral history of the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en meets the test of valid evidence in legal proceedings in Canada (Delgamuuk vs. British Columbia, 1997) equal in validity as western written evidence.

Theoretical development and testing in western physics takes on a more collective flavor than in the western social sciences. For example, the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) has brought together hundreds of scientists from all over the world to develop the large hadron collider at a cost of more than 3 billion Euros to test string theory and build toward a theory of everything (European Organization for Nuclear Research, 2008). This approach is largely consistent with First Nations concepts of knowledge building, which promote a collective, multi-disciplinary and multi-generational approach. In comparison, social science theory development and testing remains a rather solitary undertaking in which theoretical development is often done by individuals and, in the absence of ways to empirically test the theories, the involvement of others is often limited to exploring the application of the theory in a variety of contexts. Although theoretical enterprise in physics is more robustly funded than the social sciences, the collective approach to theoretical development and testing is something by which social science should be inspired.

A Social Work Theory of Everything?

The longstanding over-representation of First Nations children in care calls for new theories to inform more effective interventions. I am not suggesting that the physics theory of everything can be imported wholesale into First Nations child welfare, but rather that its basic tenets can be applied in a bicultural way to inspire new thinking about the relationship between structural risk and groups of First Nations children.

This article provides the background for the emergence of a new social work theory rooted in First Nations ontology and inspired by the theory of everything, known as the breath of life theory, which will be presented in a future article. Fundamental to the breath of life theory is the assumption that optimal personal and family well-being is achieved when Cross's relational worldview principles are in balance (Cross, 1997, 2007) across time.

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