

# The Cree Medicine Wheel as an Organizing Paradigm of Theories of Human Development

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## **Abstract**

*This paper explores the Cree Medicine Wheel as an organizing construct for examining some contemporary theories of human development. Various aspects of Medicine Wheel concepts are discussed along with aspects of knowledge about human development from the mainstream paradigm (Eurocentric) that is dominant in the academy. Perspectives on indigenous wisdom and ways of knowing are presented from an ecological position linking human development concerns to a wholistic view of human development through the Cree Medicine Wheel. The article highlights aspects of the teachings which deepen understandings of parallels in human development theories. Medicine Wheel teachings support development that maintains positive adaptation to a natural world, and can provide a description of contemporary human developmental theory from the perspective of traditional Aboriginal knowledge. Theories about different stages of human development and knowledge about assets that facilitate positive development at each stage are presented, illuminating current concerns in human development theoretical perspectives.*

## Introduction

This article uses the foundational structure and teachings of the Cree Medicine Wheel (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996) as an organizational structure for examining some contemporary understandings of human development. Human development is defined as the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development of the individual human being, as well as the cultural, social, and technological development of human families and societies.

The Cree Medicine Wheel mirrors and explains concepts of human development in an elegant and comprehensive manner, but its origin from within the paradigm of non-western Aboriginal traditions has generally confined it to a position of academic discredit. Medicine Wheel concepts have experienced a rise of influence in academic writing in the recent past. Figure 1 gives an outline of the basic concepts of the Cree Medicine Wheel referenced in this article.

The article begins with a brief literature review of Medicine Wheel concepts, followed by a brief description of the fundamental teachings of the Cree Medicine Wheel. (Readers are encouraged to reference Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996) for additional explication of the concepts used here.) This is followed by a discussion of several contemporary approaches to individual human development contextualized by the Cree Medicine Wheel teachings.

Concepts of human development arising from the Eurocentric paradigm dominant in the academy cannot be completely integrated into Medicine Wheel models, nor do they subsume Indigenous teachings. The different paradigms do not articulate the other, yet they can be contextualized in relationship to each other through deepening our understandings of parallels. (A visual image of the Two-Row Wampum Belt and accompanying teachings comes to mind). This article contrasts and contextualizes different paradigms of understanding human development, and, while attempting to avoid evaluation, is intended to provide a framework for relationship. The goal is to open discussion in the academy of deeper understandings of Indigenous knowledge regarding human development.

## **The Medicine Wheel**

There exists a range of presentations of differing concepts of the Medicine Wheel, by writers who are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who have written with various purposes, some more notable than others. A First Nations Films documentary by Richard Hersley, “The Medicine Wheel”, presents an artistic, balanced and integrated overview of the Medicine Wheel and includes research on stone Medicine Wheel sites worldwide (Hersley, 2005). This film conveys the integral idea of spirituality which is embedded in the concepts of the Medicine Wheel across time, place and culture.

The Medicine Wheel has also been used clinically in various treatment settings. Coggins (1990), a therapist, acknowledges his own heritage (Ojibwa and Ottawa) as well as influence from other Canadian, Alaskan, Mexican and American Southwestern cultures, but does not make clinical distinctions among different cultural representations of the Medicine Wheel (p. 80).

Blackwolf Jones, a licensed psychotherapist and national speaker of Ojibwa heritage in the United States, has published in professional journals on the integration of his understandings of the Medicine Wheel, and other traditional ceremonial approaches, into his work as a counselor. In one of his several books he states, “The Sacred Hoop is the circumference of the Medicine Wheel, a healing symbol of balance” (Jones, 1996, p. 307).

Lewis Mehl-Madrona, M.D., of Cherokee-European descent from the U.S., is a widely published medical doctor and researcher who has made a practice of combining western medical treatments with wholistic and Aboriginal methods of treatment. Lessons from Native American healing practices are described in his books, *Coyote Medicine* (1997) and *Coyote Wisdom* (2005), and include teachings on the Medicine Wheel from various North American Aboriginal cultures. Some of his most significant uses of Medicine Wheel concepts and other teachings are demonstrated in his work with natural childbirth, mental illnesses, diabetes, cancer and other severe illnesses (Mehl-Madrona, 1997; 2005).

Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996) provide a deep description of the Cree Medicine Wheel in the context of social work treatment theories. They present this model as an "...approach to healing individuals, groups, and communities" (p. 18). The primary author (of Oji-Cree descent) acknowledges the original teachings and training he received over many years from Cree Elders, including Elder Eddie Bellerose from Alberta, and others, who guided his work and provided the foundational knowledge and theory found in the chapter. Nabigon (2006) goes deeper into the Cree Medicine Wheel concepts through his autobiographical account of its use as a personal healing tool.

Jones, Coggins, Mehl-Madrona and Nabigon all work from the stance of the Medicine Wheel as a sacred source of healing. The theme of sacredness is at the heart of all Medicine Wheel teachings used by Aboriginal peoples in North America. Sacredness is not generally an aspect referred to in western, or Eurocentric, models of knowledge and healing, but is fundamentally integral to understanding Aboriginal theory and praxis. The Medicine Wheel is a pathway for healing among many Aboriginal peoples across the continent, used in reclaiming identity and purpose for individuals and communities.

*Seeing the World with Aboriginal Eyes: A Four Directional Perspective on Human and non-Human Values, Cultures and Relationships on Turtle Island* (2005), by Brian Rice, Ph.D., is an exploration of the world view of Aboriginal traditional knowledge through concepts of the Four Sacred Directions. This work provides a window into the following: patterns of thought; concepts of time, sacredness and the natural world; development and role of consciousness, perception, language, dance and song; understandings of relationships (metaphorical and literal); morality and ethics; the environment; knowledge, wisdom stories and creation stories; and many other aspects of Aboriginal traditional knowledge. The author works to provide a bridge between traditional knowledge and western knowledge, and explores some connections of understandings from the different ways of knowing, including the perspectives of Aboriginal cultures from other continents.

Rice (2005) states, "There are a number of correlations that one can make between Aboriginal understandings of consciousness and Jungian psychology" (p. 65).

Jung's development of the theory of the collective unconscious, its composition of "...archetypes or primordial thought patterns that can become conscious and give form to psychic contents" (p. 65) comes very close to an understanding of the development of the Aboriginal psyche that "...play[s] an integral part in forming the Aboriginal consciousness..." (p. 66). Rice's work encompasses all the concepts of human development from birth through death as perceived through Aboriginal knowledge systems, compared to western knowledge systems based on technology that has "...advanced by leaps and bounds in the past few centuries..." (p. 83). He writes, "What is being lost in this process is knowledge that is learned through introspection such as the introspection practiced through prayers, dreams and meditation" (p. 83).

### **The Cree Medicine Wheel**

Few academic works exist describing specifically the Cree Medicine Wheel theory, necessitating reliance on first generation peer-reviewed publications. Hart (2002) includes the Medicine Wheel, and the Cree Medicine Wheel, as part of his excellent foundational approach to Aboriginal helping, but does not focus solely on teachings from Cree Elders. The Cree version of the Medicine Wheel as put forth by Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996) appears in the academy for the first time in a theory textbook for Social Work (Turner, 1996). In their work, human development concepts are described through discussion of the Four Sacred Directions in terms of two aspects of life – external and internal. They write:

There are two parts of life that each person needs to pay attention to or risk imbalance...We cultivate our external self to fit into the current culture and times...We take care of our inner life by personal reflection...Through reflection we change and grow spiritually (p. 21).

The Cree Medicine Wheel is conceptualized as a circle divided into four quadrants. The inside of the circle represents the positive (light), the outside represents the negative (dark), with the center representing the core of the person, which also has a light and dark side. This establishes a visual structure (refer to Figure One) of the Aboriginal theory which is applied to understanding human development, providing problem iden-

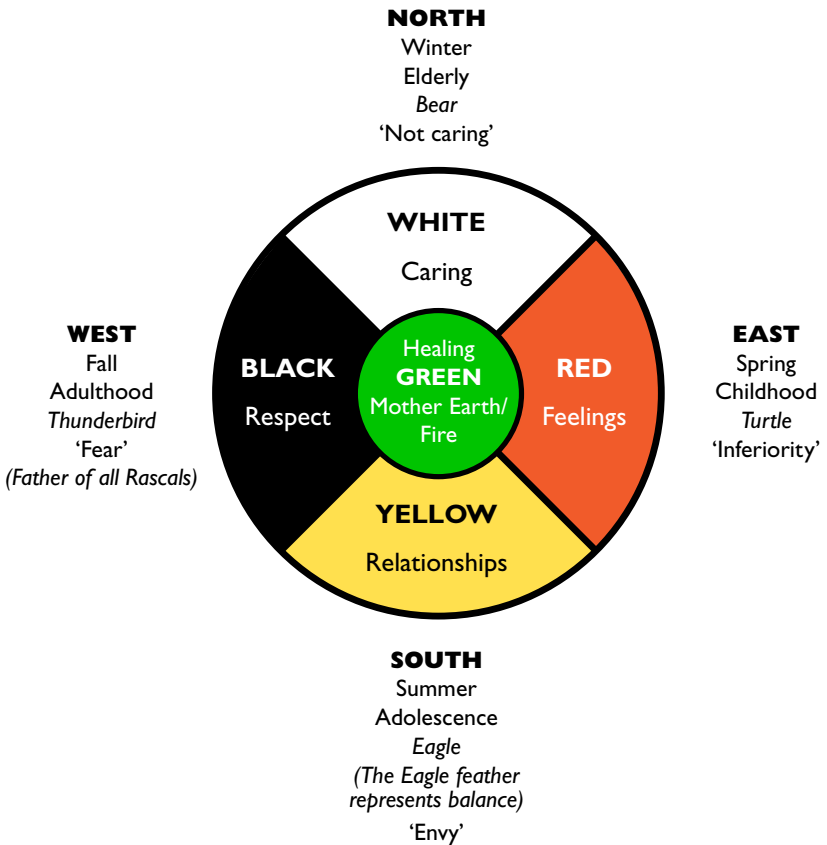
tification tools and solution identification pathways when things are out of balance. “Native people who walk the red road attempt to balance their lives between positive and negative cycles of life” (p. 22). The use of the Cree Medicine Wheel facilitates balance, thus promoting health, growth, and positive development, and minimizing risk factors that impede balance.

The literature review did not reveal sources which explore Medicine Wheel concepts regarding specific human development theories. The following figure, adapted from the work of Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996), depicts the Cree Medicine Wheel, and locates the stages of individual human development in the four quadrants. Childhood is represented in the East Door, adolescence in the South Door, adulthood in the West Door, and the elderly stage in the North Door. Other aspects of the development of human society are also located around the Cree Medicine Wheel (see pg. 145).

To better understand teachings of the Cree Medicine Wheel, concepts are usually oriented on the “Doors”, or directions, of east, south, west and north. The center represents the Self, “...the spiritual fire at the core of one’s being” (p. 21), which also has a light and a dark side, either healing or jealousy. The Four Colors represent the four races of humankind. Traditional Cree teachings convey the belief that at one time all four races lived together in peace on one body of land before it broke into separate continents. This teaching contributes to multi-cultural perspectives in understanding human development.

The East Door (spring) represents beginnings, positive aspects of renewal, good feelings, good food, vision, purpose and direction. Being able to have an awareness of emotions and an ability to share them with appropriate language and expression, as well as being able to reduce stress through laughter and sharing is integral to mental health. Having a core sense of self-esteem and self-love makes it possible to deal with inferiority, which is the “rascal” of the East Door, or the negative (dark) side of life. This negative aspect of the East Door creates shame, anger, feelings of inequality, powerlessness and victimization. “Let us not forget that we co-create our lives with our souls (minds), and so we must learn how to empower ourselves so that we can create the kind of life we really want” (p. 22). Teachings about affection, sexuality, companionship, sac-

**Figure One – The Cree Medicine Wheel**



rifice and loyalty help to create balance. This is also the direction containing teachings about childhood.

The South Door (summer) teaches about relationships with self, family and community, and is the place where values and identity are learned. Nabigon and Mawhiney write:

Adolescence is often a time of crisis. For young Natives, it is a time to define their Nativeness. The process of defining cultural heritage takes precedence over all activities, including education. It is during this period of self-exploration that a young person's academic grades may begin to decline...Elders and traditional teachers can help to understand and defuse the crisis. (p. 30)

The negative side of this direction is the “rascal” of envy, defined by the Elders as wanting something without being willing to work for it. Patience is taught as a gift of time which helps build strengths and create better balance. Spiritual reflection, quietness and self awareness are taught as ways to “...become aware of our mind, body, and spirit” (p. 30).

The West Door (fall) represents respect, reason, and water. This is also the Door which is entered when it comes time for a person to go into the Spirit world, thus death is often referred to as “through the West Door.” Resentment is the “rascal” of this direction, which prevents individuals from showing respect for self and others, contributing to imbalances and problems in personal development and community relationships. Humility – “looking twice” – is taught as recognizing “our place within nature” (p. 31), the way to learn and earn respect. Nabigon and Mawhiney write:

Caring is represented at the north door...It is action...being willing to change, and keeping the focus on ourselves rather than what others do are the keys to action... Some cultures say it is selfish to think of ourselves first. This is a misunderstanding of the dynamics involved. Providing space to care about ourselves allows others the space to start caring for themselves without being overly dependent (p. 25).



Understanding the North Door (winter) holds a key to understanding the process of change. This is the direction of caring, change, movement, and air, which has the power to move things around. The teachings instruct how to deal with the “rascal” of this direction, “not caring”, through natural methods of healing by “...yelling, laughing, sweating, crying, yawning, and shaking. These can help a person move through fear” (p. 31). Consequences of misunderstandings in this direction create imbalances in individuals, families, communities and even the larger world as the impact of apathy, thoughtlessness (not caring) and disregard for others impacts all directions. The teachings are clear, “...we cannot receive caring from another unless we already care about ourselves” (p. 23). Between the West Door and the North Door is the “rascal” of fear.

At the center of the Cree Medicine Wheel is found the fire of the soul (Figure 1), the identity of the person. The color green represents Mother Earth. Here is the place of healing, the positive side, and the place of jealousy, the negative side. Nabigon (2006) writes:

If we do not honour the negative side of life we as humans either fall very ill or, worse, inflict our pain upon each other. Touching the negative aspects of life can be beneficial. If we learn to honour and recognize all of our emotions, including the negative qualities, we can and will become the bearers of our own pearls of wisdom (pp. 53-54).

### **Perspectives on Aboriginal Knowledge**

Traditional teachings regarding relationships with Mother Earth, the Spirit World, and relationships with the Creator and all of the Creation contribute to a full understanding of the Cree Medicine Wheel concepts. Aboriginal teachings encompass a totality of the human condition – physical, spiritual, mental and emotional – and the significance of balance is emphasized. All aspects of life are intricately interconnected. Relationships are fundamental to understanding the nature of events, and establishing standards of behavior. Separating things out from each other and studying them as singular entities without a wholistic viewpoint as an organizing point does not fall within the natural way of thinking in Aboriginal epistemology. Dominance, subordination and aggressiveness are not valued, but assertiveness and strength are taught. Theories of human

development which incorporate wholistic perspectives are more closely compatible with Medicine Wheel concepts than those theories which segment various stages of development.

Traditional Aboriginal approaches to knowledge development have not been warmly welcomed by the Eurocentric model of the academic world. There are several possible explanations: first, traditional approaches are not seen as scientific and therefore it is not possible to validate these ways of knowing using the highly valued standard of scientific models established in the academy; secondly, Aboriginal scholars have been cautious in articulating traditional concepts in ways that are readily applicable to the dominant paradigm. There are some good reasons for that caution.

Protecting traditional knowledge is a focus of concern for Indigenous people worldwide, and for governmental bodies that seek to protect and preserve the knowledge ways of Aboriginal people. Battiste and Henderson (2005) correctly state:

Survival for Indigenous People is more than a question of physical existence. It is an issue of protecting, preserving, and enhancing Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems, language, and environments. It is a matter of sustaining spiritual links with ecosystems and communities. Unfortunately, these ecosystems and communities are often critically endangered. The awareness that the demise of Indigenous populations and the loss of their languages are causing the demise of Indigenous knowledge and the loss of biological diversity has not stopped the rush on Indigenous knowledge systems by outsiders. These outsiders have not attempted to prevent the extermination of Indigenous Peoples or their ecosystems; instead they have intensified their efforts to access, to know, and to assert control over this endangered knowledge and these endangered resources. This is such a tragic response.... (pp. 242-243).

Better understanding of indigenous knowledge worldwide may be a key to the survival of people and the planet. It will certainly be a key to the survival of indigenous peoples; however, expropriating concepts such as the Medicine Wheel in order to gain control and management over

Aboriginal people is an abhorrent prospect. Rice (2005) writes:

Based on a tradition of some non-Aboriginal academics misrepresenting or not acknowledging elders' teachings, Aboriginal authors are reluctant to delve deeply into Aboriginal spiritual knowledge for fear of being exploited. There is some truth to these concerns. However, based on my experiences as an Aboriginal academic involved in ceremonial life, and on others who are more knowledgeable than myself, there is no truth to the fear of giving away the secrets of sacred knowledge by writing them down. Most written literature provides only some basic fundamentals of sacred knowledge; ... years of training in sacred knowledge cannot be replicated by simply writing about the experience... Therefore, our fears of exploitation must not prevent us from writing about Aboriginal spiritual or cultural knowledge. It cannot be exploited (sic) only misrepresented. (Rice, p. xi)

Jane Korkka (2005), in her literary analysis of Rudy Wiebe's writings (a non-Native Canadian author whose works often feature Native themes or characters), asks:

Does this, then, suggest that native (sic) peoples may still find themselves pushed into a marginal position, in danger of being deprived of their own voice? Yes, it does. What it does not mean is that no white person should ever be involved in telling native stories. An injustice will not be remedied if all dialogue is severed. Though clashes of views will emerge as long as the dialogue continues, they do reflect the ongoing interaction between Native people and the mainstream Anglo-Canadian society... If there is no one willing to work as a mediator, or no one who is allowed to do so, there is no chance at all of changing an unbalanced relationship between different peoples (p. 372).

What is called for is an approach of working cooperatively and in balance with Aboriginal "ways of knowing". The Medicine Wheel concepts convey the wisdom traditions of cultures with tens of thousands of years of knowledge evolution embedded within the traditional ways of life and

worldviews. Working within these concepts provides potential for re-establishing balance between peoples, and with the environment.

Medicine Wheel concepts teach the idea of balance in human development in order to maintain the sustenance of all living beings, including all aspects of the planet, which is considered a living being. Healthy human development is inextricably linked with healthy environmental conditions, both physical and social, and it is possible to seek, and find, approaches to sharing together in the promotion of human development in healthy environments in a balanced manner. No one “owns” knowledge and wisdom, and indigenous ways of knowing provide much that is fundamental for adequate understandings of human development.

Indeed, it could be said that the final front of conflict between forces of colonization and traditional societies lies in this area of indigenous, or Aboriginal, knowledge. The struggle currently seen to restore cultural ways of knowing in Aboriginal communities everywhere is becoming more urgent and significant as the world faces calamities such as economic collapse and global climate change. The heritage of colonization on every continent continues to contribute to upheaval in social and economic stability. The pressure from an increasingly complex technological world presents challenges for families and individuals, especially in Aboriginal communities, at the most basic of levels. The heritage of a colonial history simply cannot be ignored. It must be addressed in order to adequately understand the human developmental challenges facing communities today.

When Albert Memmi first published his classic work, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965), he could not have foreseen its far-reaching impact. First published in French in 1957, the description of the social and psychological effects with which colonialism impacts both colonizer and colonized became both anathema to the oppressive colonizer and those who profited from the effects of colonialism, as well as inspiration to those who would bring down the colonial system. The developmental impact on human populations is devastatingly described in his work. His words of fifty years ago sound a challenge, “To refuse colonization is one thing; to adopt the colonized and be adopted by them seems to be another;

and the two are far from being connected” (p. 22-23). His stance could be seen to be compatible with those who make efforts toward indigenization of the academy.

Memmi’s challenge for connection remains to be addressed adequately, but certainly one approach is to increase understanding of how human development is conceptualized by those within differing paradigms and systems. For this purpose, the following section will endeavor to place contemporary models of human development within the paradigm presented by the Cree Medicine Wheel.

### **Contemporary Theories of Human Development**

Human beings in all times everywhere have been integrally social creatures, observing and studying each other and their environments, learning the best possible ways of surviving and developing competence. The study of the human development field is very broad, encompassing the disciplines of Biology, Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, Anthropology, Education, Economics, Multi-Cultural Studies, Women’s Studies and others. The discussion here will be limited primarily to psychological and sociological perspectives, highlighting key concepts.

In Uranjnik, Levin & Garg (2008) five major areas of child development are examined: maturation and learning, motor development, cognitive development, language, and emotional and social development (pp. 386-389). Biological aspects of development are referred to in each of these areas and growth is described as being guided by an “inborn maturational blueprint”. They refer to Jean Piaget’s contribution, a biological blueprint of the process by which children move through the stages of development he names as sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational. They acknowledge that criticism of Piaget’s work has been noted by contemporary psychology, but also cite the extensive research that has been conducted on Piaget’s developmental theories which have contributed to understanding the cognitive processes of children and adolescents. The majority of research has been conducted with Eurocentric models, settings and “subjects”, but aspects of his theories can be located at various points on the Cree Medicine Wheel.

Piaget's perspective can be seen in teachings surrounding the East and South Doors. Good food (spiritual and physical) is represented in the East Door, which is applicable to the importance of appropriate biological, physical, cognitive, spiritual and psychological development of the child. As the child is born and develops within the safety and nurturing that is taught in the East Door, she learns about identity, choice and personal power. Children reared in traditional Aboriginal societies learned by observing (Vision) and making their own choices. Language development is also located in the East Door. Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996) state:

Unless children are allowed to feel they have some power of choice over their own lives as they grow up, they are likely to feel they are victims, or at the very least, they will fear people they perceive as having authority over them. This perception is often carried over into adulthood and can lead to a sense of powerlessness...and other psychological problems...we co-create our lives with our souls (minds), and so we must learn how to empower ourselves... (p. 22).

It is believed that developmental difficulties in the East Door will result in a sense of shame and inferiority, impeding the development of self-esteem, personal agency and co-creation necessary for healthy adult role function in humans.

In the South Door the aspects of adolescent development are located within the primary function of learning about relationships with the self and with others. Patience, listening, and development of self identity are emphasized. Learning how to work for what one wants, to deal with emotions of envy and longing (both in the material and spiritual aspects), and to correctly exercise responsibility for oneself and one's actions are primary tasks to accomplish in this Door (pp. 23-26). Feelings of anger and alienation are believed to arise from not learning how to listen to the Self, from not having good relationships with others or healthy connections to community. Development of identity is a primary task of adolescence, a time when impulsivity is difficult to manage. Traditional teachings encourage adults and youths to interact as a way of teaching patience. Relationships with people, with the natural world, and with the spiritual aspect of life are seen as resources to assist youth in development.

New research in brain function sheds light on aspects of human development. The complex neural and neurochemical development that occurs in the human brain, before and after birth and continuing into adulthood, mirrors in physicality the states that Piaget outlines in behavioral and emotional development (Kolb & Fantie, p. 31). Good pre- and post-natal nutrition is crucial for adequate brain development, which is recognized in the East Door. The impact of developmental deficits in the brain resulting from poor nutrition, the effects of environmental chemicals, and various medications and drugs has a lifelong effect. Communities around the world that are heavily affected by neurotoxins, impoverishment and poor nutrition face monumental challenges in assisting their populations to achieve the conditions of positive human development.

Keating and Hertzman (1999), in *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations*, highlight the ways in which labor market economies place almost inhuman amounts of stress on families. They identify the “gradient effect” (pp. 2-3; 9), illustrating how societies which carry great disparities in socioeconomic (SES) gradients among their population also have significant indicators for poor health and developmental health. Families and communities at the lower end of the scale in wellbeing, experience greater SES “gradient effects” and face difficult challenges in meeting developmental requirements for good nutrition and protective neurobiological factors for developing human beings.

Keating and Hertzman indicate that there may be a limit to the adaptability trajectory for human beings, and warn that concerns regarding the breakdown of social structures fostering adaptability should be heeded by leaders, politicians, economists, educators, and others. Parts I and II of their book present an elaboration on the concept of biological embedding of these SES gradients in developing human beings. Lack of assets and support in early stages of development has implications for developmental hindrances across the life span. They indicate more understanding is needed about humans who demonstrate resiliency against the negative effects of the SES gradient in order to develop methods of prevention and intervention in “problematic developmental pathways” (p. 12).

The words of Keating and Hertzman (1999) and Kolb and Fantie (2009) can be seen to correlate with the West Door, the place where con-

cerns of adulthood emerge. “Respect is represented in the west on the middle circle. The literal meaning of respect is to look twice... The power of reason is placed in the west door. With reasoning power we can think twice...” (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996, pp. 24-25). The responsibilities of adulthood imply that harmful thoughts and actions to self and others are to be avoided. Growth in this direction involves assuming responsibility and showing respect for others. Societies where these values are deeply embedded in the culture will be less likely to have steep SES gradients, as responsibility for the community as a whole is an integral concern of everyone. Care, concern, respect and non-judgmental attitudes facilitate behaviors and practices that contribute to the welfare of all members of the community. Contemporary societies would do well to move to the West Door and “look twice” at the developmental concerns facing their citizens. Current research indicates that the breakdown of macrosystems is having negative effects on human development across the lifespan (Keating & Hertzman, 1999) and around the world.

The elderly are notably absent in contemporary western theories of human development, although Bronfenbrenner (2005) indirectly addresses this concern in his work. He writes, “Human development may be defined as *the phenomenon of constancy and change in the characteristics of the person over the life course*” (p. 108) (his italics). His Process-Person-Context Model is an “analysis of variations in developmental processes and outcomes as a *joint function of the characteristics of the environment and of the person*” (p. 115) (his italics). He adds the dimension of time, the concept of the individual contributing to his own development, and the role of culture in human development, and puts forward the understanding that human developmental processes continue into old age.

While his article primarily focuses on child and adolescent development he acknowledges the need for research on the “...macrosystems most salient in modern life” (p. 152) which include the adult worlds within which child development occurs. This would include not only children’s families but their neighborhoods, subcultures, and larger societal cultures. He develops the concept of “nested environments” within which the developing human grows. He writes:

The psychological development of parents is powerfully influenced by the behavior and development of their children. This



phenomenon occurs through the life course...often becomes especially pronounced during adolescence...the impact of the latter's behavior on the subsequent development of their parents has yet to receive the systematic investigation that it deserves (p. 12).

Bronfenbrenner goes on to say:

Over the life course, the process of attachment exhibits a turnaround. In the beginning, it is the children who are the beneficiaries of the parents' irrational commitment, whereas toward the end the roles are reversed. Then it is the elderly parents who receive the love and care of their now middle-aged children... (p. 13).

He continues by noting that his literature search revealed no information on the influence of parent-child attachment "...in the future development of the *parent* in contrast to that of the child" (p. 13) (his italics).

The Medicine Wheel, in contrast, does give some indication of a path to understanding the process of relationship development between the generations and of the role of the elderly in the life span of developing humans. In the North Door, "Caring can be defined by our level of interaction, within family, school, community, and nation" (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996, p. 31). Elders teach caring as a common sense activity that all humans are capable of, no matter what their age. Every action has consequences – the wisdom and guidance of the elderly are essential to the necessary caring function of the community. Not caring implies that dependency will be the outcome, inhibiting growth and change:

Caring is more than a feeling. It is action. It is important to remember the reasons for caring as well. Taking risks on behalf of ourselves, being willing to change, and keeping the focus on ourselves rather than what others do are the keys to action and are all important aspects to caring. This always involves persistence. (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996, p. 25).

Engagement in risky activities is generally looked at in human development studies as a negative thing, "...associated with some probability of undesirable results (Boyer, 2006, p. 292). Boyer's extensive and com-

prehensive review of the literature in cognitive, emotional, psychobiological and social developmental research highlights what is emerging regarding the topic of risk, acknowledging that risk-taking is sometimes necessary and positive. The role of elderly people, as described by the Medicine Wheel, assists developing individuals in being able to understand and handle risk, thus supporting the community in being able to provide a protective network for its members.

The greatest opportunities for understanding risk taking, as well as aversive, behaviors may lie in new studies in the field of neuroscience. The ability to have access through new technology to the processes of normal brain activity, as well as to the effects of damage and/or developmental deficits, is opening up exciting new understandings of human development and behavior. The modulation of fear and the various mechanisms of brain chemistry that vary from individual to individual are better understood. More is understood about the role of brain function in processing decision making and risk.

Medicine Wheel teachings in general contain much to assist humans in learning the techniques, methods, and practices involved in making decisions, taking risks, maintaining relationships, handling emotions, learning difficult tasks, practicing caring behaviors and taking responsibility for oneself. The Medicine Wheel has strong roots in Aboriginal histories, helping maintain healthy communities in pre-colonial cultures.

Several researchers of human development address the issue of culture in psychological studies. Ratner (1999) and Valsiner (2001) have written and researched extensively on this subject. Ratner (1999) highlights the reality that "...psychological phenomena are cultural in their essence... [include] practical social activities... [are] organized by social concepts... [and arise] through participating in broad, collective social activities" (pp. 22-25). Culture cannot be divorced from human development and behavior or psychological phenomena, and varies in human societies around the world. Culture is pliable, influenced over time and space by multiple factors.

Myopic cultural assumptions impede researchers' ability to conduct inquiry without bias. Valsiner (2001) addresses this challenge with his

concept of “cultural blinders” and calls for an effort to, “...create general developmental science [which] can transcend the historically established blinders of child psychology” (p. 167). Vygotsky attempted to transcend the cultural myopia of the past through his studies of child development in his present, yet he was also a product of his Russian post-revolutionary Marxian context (Blunden, 2001) and equipped with his own set of blinders. Lerner (2006) writes:

Any individual may have a diverse range of potential developmental trajectories and, as well, all groups – because of the necessarily diverse developmental paths of the people within them – will have a diverse range of developmental trajectories. Diversity...is both a strength of individuals and an asset for planning and promoting means to improve the human condition (p. 11).

The underlying assumption here seems to be that humans have a developmental trajectory that is linear in nature, moving from lower to higher levels of development. This assumption is not shared by indigenous worldviews. Medicine Wheel teachings are based on the wisdom of the past, providing stability and continuity, one of many essential protective factors for positive youth development identified in Benson et al. (2006).

Medicine Wheel teachings support development that maintains positive adaptation to a natural world. The natural world is increasingly encroached upon by pressures of technology, population growth, economic upheaval, societal disruptions, global climate change, etc. It would be culturally myopic to assert that ancient traditions have nothing to offer human developmental understandings in currently relevant ways, or that contemporary findings in human development have nothing to offer indigenous communities worldwide.

Benson et al. (2006) offer much in terms of assets to human growth and development (refer to Appendix One), but cite almost no significant major studies done in cultures other than western Eurocentric societies. Benson describes the assets of positive youth development as, “...competence, confidence, connection, character and caring (or compassion)... [and] contribution” (pp. 905), characteristics most human societies incorporate in their conceptualizations of human development.

## Conclusion

Medicine Wheel concepts can provide a description of human developmental theory from the perspective of traditional Aboriginal knowledge. The Cree Medicine Wheel provides theories about different stages of human development, appropriate developmental tasks of each stage, and knowledge about assets that facilitate positive development at each stage. The Cree Medicine Wheel illuminates the role of relationships with humans and all of Creation, the role of spirituality, developmental plasticity, diversity, the interconnectedness of “nested environments”, and the concept of co-creation between self and Creator. The characteristics of Medicine Wheel wisdom from various nations correspond with theories of human development from the western knowledge paradigm. Future research on Medicine Wheel teachings in the human development field has the potential to expand understandings of their relevance, and applicability of indigenous knowledge and wisdom in contemporary communities.

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## Appendix

### Pyramid of Developmental Assets by Benson et al. (2006) In Positive Human Development

#### **Intimacy**

Person has gained affective attachments to others that reflects solid sense of self in healthy, loving ways; has ability to make and keep commitments & respect boundaries

#### **Family/Peer**

The developing human is linked to growing relationships within a lifelong network of stable people; within the family the relationships extend through the generations; within the peer group the developing human experiences the give and take of caring, safe interpersonal connections

#### **Personal Assets**

The growing human is capable of developing his/her own inner assets in the following areas: Intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, physical, and will. Personal assets will manifest in following ways: curiosity about self and the world; willingness to learn and put effort into mastering new tasks; develops moral capacity to see how the self impacts on others; the ability to make choices that demonstrates respect, responsibility, honesty, courage, compassion, empathy; ability to be pro-social; ability to care for self

#### **Contextual Foundation**

The human being is developing within a community and societal context that promotes capacity in the following areas:  
- physical needs are adequately met (food, shelter, clothing, medical care, safety and security); person is learning at developmentally appropriate levels the strategies for assuming responsibility in all the above areas.  
- in the context of the community the developing human gains an intellectual/affective capacity which promotes problem-solving skills, emotional management skills, mastery of environment, and ability to effectively negotiate a variety of relationships; develops positive feelings about self, others and the surrounding world with an ability to contribute to the community; the community values the growing human in tangible ways readily apparent to all and provides adequate support to parenting and educating children and youth; opportunities for meaningful activities that contribute to a healthy community are available and support & encouragement given to all members of community

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