Impact of Historical Trauma & Microaggressions on the Wellbeing of American Indian Communities

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Map for Today

- Setting the Context
- Defining Historical Trauma & Microaggressions
- The Impact of Historical Trauma & Microaggressions
- Acknowledgements
Fourth World Context of Indigenous People

“Fourth World” are situations where minority or indigenous populations exist within a nation where institutionalized power and privilege are held by a colonizing subordinating majority (O’Neil, 1986; Browne & Fiske, 2001)

An “Indigenist perspective” refers to a progressive Native viewpoint that acknowledges the colonized or Fourth World status of Natives in the U.S. and abroad and advocates for indigenous empowerment and sovereignty
What Do We Mean When We Say “Historical Trauma”?
Historical Trauma

Collective and cumulative emotional wounding across that results from cataclysmic events targeting a community.

The trauma is held personally and collectively and is transmitted over generations.

Communally-based incidents that cause catastrophic upheaval or high levels of community distress among and within indigenous communities.

Events include planned phenomenon by government and government-sponsored institutions.
Historical Trauma Response

Historical and contemporary traumatic events can lead to a “soul wound”

The soul wound or ‘spirit wounding” is the cumulative effect of historical trauma brought on by centuries of colonialism, genocide, and oppression

Psychological ramifications include internalization of the oppressor, unresolved grief, and communal mourning

(Braveheart, 2000)
Dominant Group → Subjugation of a Population

- Segregation/Displacement
- Phys/Psych Violence
- Economic Destruction
- Cultural Dispossession

First Generation or Primary Generations

Mass Trauma

Trauma Response
Physical - Social - Psychological

Second or Subsequent Generations
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Historical Trauma

MASS TRAUMA EXPERIENCE

Dominant Group → Subjugation of a Population

Segregation/Displacement (plantation, reservation, refugee camp, etc.) → Physical/Psychological Violence (acute and chronic) → Economic Destruction (loss of resources, legal rights) → Cultural Dispossession (loss of cultural roles, language, religion, etc.)

First Generation or Primary Generations

Trauma Response

Physical Response
- Nutritional stress
- Compromised immune system
- Biochemical abnormalities
- Endocrine impairment
- Adrenal maladaptation
- Gene impairment/expression

Resulting in: malnutrition, diabetes, hyperglycemia, infectious disease, heart disease, hypertension, cancer

Psychological Response
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Depression
- Panic/Anxiety Disorders

Resulting in:
- Anger/aggression
- Social isolation
- Shame
- Loss of self-worth
- Terror/fear
- Grief
- Withdrawal
- Numbness

Resilience

Protective Factors

Social Response

Increased suicide rate
- Domestic violence
- Unemployment
- Child maltreatment
- Poverty

Resulting in:
- Breakdown of community/family structures and social networks, loss of resources, separation from loved ones

Secondary and Subsequent Generations

Modes of Intergenerational Transmission
- Physiological
- Genetic
- Environmental
- Psychosocial
- Social/Economic/Political Systems
- Legal and Social Discrimination
Historical Trauma:

A Native American Experience
Manifest Destiny
"In our intercourse with the Indians it must always be borne in mind that we are the most powerful party...we are assuming, and I think with propriety, that our civilization ought to take the place of their barbarous habits. **We therefore claim the right to control the very soil they occupy**, and we assume that it is our duty to coerce them, if necessary, into the adoption and practice of our habits and customs...I would not seriously regret the total disappearance of the buffalo from our western prairies, in its effect upon the Indians, regarding it rather as a means of hastening their sense of dependence upon the products of the soil."
“The Most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and inhuman. The rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under a debt to him. American and Indian, Boer and Zulu, Cossack and Tartar, New Zealander and Maori – in each case the victor, horrible though many of his deeds are, has laid deep the foundations for the future greatness of a mighty people. But it is of incalculable importance that America, Australia, and Siberia should pass out of the hands of their red, black, and yellow aboriginal owners, and become the heritage of the dominant world races.”
General William Tecumseh Sherman’s letter to John Sherman Sept. 23, 1868

“...But the more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next war. For the more I see of these Indians the more convinced am I that they have all to be killed, or be maintained as a species of paupers.”
“Kill and scalp all [Indians], little and big ... nits make lice.”

Colonel John Milton Chivington
Genocide
Massacre
Relocation and Forced Removal
Mass Execution of Dakota War Prisoners
Mankato, MN - Dec 26, 1862
Dakota Concentration Camp at Fort Snelling
1862–1863
Cultural Genocide
Forced Assimilation

“Kill the Indian, Save the Man”
– Richard Henry Pratt
Spiritual Trauma
Health Trauma
Mental Health Trauma
Environmental Trauma
Contemporary Historically Traumatic Events

- **Relocation Period** (1950s and 1960s) – Native people were moved from reservations to urban areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, etc.

- **Child Welfare Policies** – Through the late 1970s, a significant number of Native children were removed from their homes and placed in non-Native adoptive or foster homes.
What Do We Mean When We Say “Microaggression”?
Microaggressions

Chronic daily assaults, attacks, and injustices that Native people endure – often in the form of interpersonal behaviors and environmental messages - that are denigrating, demeaning or invalidating and take psychological and emotional toll on the individual
Types of Microaggressions

**Microinsults:**

Behaviors that convey rudeness, insensitivity, or reflect unfair treatment or demean identity or experiences (e.g., eye-rolling when a Native person brings up issues related to Native communities)

**Colonial Authority** – Experiences where non-Natives assert colonial authority to control images, to invade physical space, or assert their own authority over all things Native
Types of Microaggressions

Microinvalidations

Communications that nullify the experiential reality or identity of Native people, rendering them invisible (e.g., “you can’t take a joke,” requesting to “dress as an Indian” when guest lecturing, etc.)

Colonial Erasure – Characterized by invalidating experiences that erase Indianness or indigeneity (e.g. listening to a lecture or discussion by instructors or persons in authority about Indians is if they no longer exist, being told you “don’t look or act Indian,” etc.)
Types of Microaggressions

Microassaults

Explicit racial derogatory attacks or purposeful discriminatory actions (e.g. direct and intentional racist comments and “jokes,” doing “a war whoop” in the presence of Native people, etc.)
What Do Microaggressions Look Like?
In honor of your birthday, Brave Eagle will contact the ghosts of our ancestors to find the perfect Indian name for you, a name that reflects your true spirit and abilities.

Hi-yaah-ah-hiiiii...
Could I go on the hunting trip with you?

Naw! A squaw's place is in the tepee!
SAVE A FISH
SPEAR AN INDIAN
IN Whose Honor?
American Indian Mascots in Sports

a documentary by Jay Rosenstein
CHOPARD

Mille Miglia “Gran Turismo XL” automatic stainless steel watch on a natural black rubber strap with deployant buckle. $4,900

Available for in-store purchase only in select stores.
But I'm honoring you, dude!
REALLY?
YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE AN INDIAN...
U.S. apologizes for Guatemala STD experiments

Government researchers infected patients with syphilis, gonorrhea without their consent in the 1940s

By Robert Bazell
Chief science and health correspondent

U.S. government medical researchers intentionally infected hundreds of people in Guatemala, including institutionalized mental patients, with gonorrhea and syphilis without their knowledge or permission more than 60 years ago.

Many of those infected were encouraged to pass the infection onto others as part of the study.

About one third of those who were infected never got adequate treatment.

On Friday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius
Impact of Historical Trauma and Microaggressions
Research on Natives and Non-Natives shows that racial discrimination (microaggressions) has been correlated with:

- Depressive symptoms
- Global measures of distress
- Anxiety symptoms
- Poor general health
- Poor Educational Attainment and Academic Success
Everyday discrimination is much more stressful than time-limited discrimination.

Microaggressions may have a greater negative impact on health outcomes than acute single-event traumas.

Among AI/ANs, one study found that perceived discrimination was related to increased AOD use and depression. (Whitbeck & Morris, 2001)
Impact of Historical Trauma

- Erosion of Communities & Families
- Loss of Cultural Knowledge & Traditions
- Loss of Role Definition
- Physical & Spiritual Displacement
- Suppression of Indigenous Spiritual Practices
- Loss of Language
- Lateral Violence within Families & Communities
- Mistrust in health care, justice systems, educational systems, etc.
Intergenerational Transmission of Historical Trauma Effects

No clinically significant difference between children of holocaust survivors and Jewish non-survivor controls in terms of PTSD; however, when the survivor children were exposed to stressful events, they were significantly more likely to develop PTSD or sub-threshold PTSD symptoms than controls (Danieli, 1998).

Similar multigenerational effects have been documented among Japanese internment survivors and offspring.

For Native people, increased sensitivity or hyperarousal to stressful events, in particular to events that act as reminders of their colonized status, may predispose them to heightened trauma responses and corresponding symptoms.
Historically Traumatic Events

- Anger
- Depression
- PTSD
- Cultural Shame
- Substance Abuse & Maladaptive Coping
- Tribal & Family Dysfunction
- Violence
- Stress

Adapted from Johnson Model of Multigenerational Trauma
© 1998 Carrie Johnson, PhD.
Every aspect of our functioning is impacted.

Each of these areas significantly hinders one’s ability to engage fully in work, vocation, education, and recreation.
The Social and Health Status of AI/ANs

AI/AN are younger than general population
- 39% under age 20 (vs. 29% general pop)
- Median age is 24 years (vs. 32 years general pop)

AI/AN are significantly below national average for educational attainment
- Less likely to graduate from High School
- Significantly under-represented in advanced education
The Social and Health Status of AI/ANs

AI/AN are significantly poorer than the general population

- Nearly 32% at or below poverty level (vs. 13% for all groups)
- 16% AI men & 13% AI women unemployed (vs. 6.4% and 6.2% for all US men and women, respectively)
Suicide: fourth leading cause of death for youth ages 10-14, third for ages 15-24 and is the second leading cause of death for both age groups.

Nationally, suicide is the 2.4 times greater than the rate for all youth

AI/ANs have the second highest rate of child abuse and neglect among children under age 18

The Social and Health Status of AI/ANs

- Violent crime victimization 2.5 times higher for AI/AN

- Violent crime is declining for the nation, but rising among AI/AN

- Rape and sexual assault among AI/AN women 3.5 times greater than the overall population

The Social and Health Status of AI / ANs

Heart Disease
Cancer
Unintentional Injury
Diabetes
Stroke
Chronic Liver Disease
Suicide
Influenza & Pneumonia

Mental Health
Substance Use
Obesity
Sudden Infant Death
Hypertension
Infectious diseases
(HIV, Hepatitis B/C, TB)
Nephrotic Syndrome

Source: CDC Office of Minority Health
Cahokia
Indigenous People Around the World Share ...

- Pervasive patterns of health disparities
- Unequal burden of chronic illnesses
- Disproportionate levels of mortality and morbidity for behavioral health conditions
- Disproportionate exposure to structural inequalities, environmental toxins
- High levels of poverty and socioeconomic deprivation
- Exposure to chronic and persistent discrimination
- Poor access to health and social services
- Remarkably similar legacies of colonialism and suppression of cultural practices
Migwitch and Pidamaye

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