

Ma-Kap-Pii: Historical Trauma Perceptions from Diverse Cultures

Lydia Schildt-Silva

lydsil26@yahoo.com

Salish Kootenai College

Abstract

This research project is to demonstrate the similar affects that historical trauma (HT) produces on diverse cultures. Due to the nature of this research, the principal investigator felt it necessary to follow traditional Indigenous methods of oral history. Native orators tell stories about history, culture, values, and traditions which are how Indigenous people disseminate information. Therefore, the chosen approach to this project was to capture the participants' oral history on film in order to have a visual perspective and to understand the awareness of the participants' experiences of HT. The participants for this film are professionals who have worked with and/or experienced HT. Some links that are evident is how the parenting model of the cultures changed after acculturation or internment, the loss of dignity, shame within the cultures, and the retraumatization that people suffer inter-generationally. The principal investigator found her theory to be evident in the similarities in varied cultures that have experienced HT. Some differences, however, are how the various cultures manage the healing process, if at all and to what degree they maybe healing. More research is warranted on the subject of historical trauma, which should include oral histories. Oral history should be included because the indigenous histories have not been heard or documented in their world view; only the Western perspective has been documented.

Ma-Kap-Pii: Historical Trauma Perceptions from Diverse Cultures

In order to understand this research expedition into historical trauma, I will explain my inner journey. I am Blackfeet, and was raised on the reservation to the age of five, when my father died. I did not understand the emotion I had was grief, least of all, the consequence of grief; depression, I felt vulnerable. With no idea how to begin the healing process or any idea that I needed to heal, as an adult, I became accustomed to living with the anguish of unresolved grief. Grief is powerful and depletes motivation, energy for life, and unresolved, can hold one captive in despair. When I married and had my first child, I decided to return to college. For the first time, historical trauma (HT) was presented to me in an academic setting. I then realized that historical trauma was the missing piece of the puzzle, the puzzle being loss and the confusing feelings of grief. I needed to begin the healing process. As the knowledge of HT increased, it became clear that the reasons for the present life struggles of Native Americans, is historical trauma. I have known and felt historical trauma my entire life, I now know what it's called and can acknowledge it. In Indian Country, there is a belief in "bad medicine" or "being witched". Historical trauma is the ultimate bad medicine. An example is the undeserved brutality that was forced upon the tribes and the lack of understanding by the colonizers of the Indian way of life. The effects of HT continue among American Indians today. Historical trauma is for us to voice, for us to decide the paths for healing, and for our version of our history to be heard.

The first, to conduct research on the effects of historical trauma among Native Americans is Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart. According, to Braveheart, historical trauma is defined as: "a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations,

emanating from massive group trauma”. The consequences of historical trauma are still producing dysfunction in Native American lives. Some of these effects include racism, alcoholism, loss of land, loss of identity and culture, broken family systems due to boarding schools, sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, acculturation, assimilation, oppression, despair, and shame, high rates of suicide and high violent death rates, currently foster care and poverty are the basis for genocide (Yellow Horse Braveheart, 2000). As each new generation becomes aware of the atrocities their ancestors sustained, --the loss of land, the forced removal from ancestral lands by quarantine; (i.e., imprisonment of various kinds), the removal of children, the extermination of several tribes and the continued broken treaties, they become overwhelmed. Whether the telling of this history comes directly from family members or from historical documents, the result is traumatizing. According to Eduardo and Bonnie Duran, the first contact between European and Native Americans was an “environmental shock” (p.32). The world that Native Americans had known for generations was threatened and destroyed. They explained,

“The loss and separation was not only from loved ones but also the loss of the relationship the people had with their daily world the losses were not allowed the time for proper bereavement and grief process thus adding to the wound in the Native American to psyche” (Duran, 1995, p. 32).

There was an extreme change in the way Natives lived after the Europeans came to the Americas. Not only did Natives lose land, traditions, and family, they also lost their freedom. They became wards of the US government and, as a consequence, an oppressed people. The fact that they didn’t have time to process what, how and why their world had changed caused an imbalance and disruption in the Indian communities of their usual way of life.

Genocide

The International Convention defines genocide for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in Article II (1951) as:

“In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (The United Nations).

According to Gregory H. Stanton, president of Genocide Watch and a research professor in Genocide Studies and Prevention at George Mason University, there are eight stages of genocide:

1. Classification
2. Symbolization
3. Dehumanization
4. Organization
5. Polarization

6. Preparation

7. Extermination

8. Denial

Stanton believes there is a genocidal process and to prevent it, one should understand the stages. Each stage supports the other. The last three stages are similar to what happened in the Native American genocide. The sixth stage is preparation. This includes identification, expropriation, concentration, and transportation. Identification includes lists of victim, marking of houses, and ID cards identifying their ethnic or religious group and expropriation of property belonging to the victims. An example of this is, the United States government's removal of hundreds of thousands of Japanese-Americans from their homes, letting them take one bag but forced to leave all their other belongings behind. Concentration includes putting victims into one place all together such as stadiums or churches. For example, Hitler herded Jewish people into ghettos and did not allow them to leave unless it was to labor camps or to the death chambers. Transportation was then organized by the state in this case committing genocide for the victims to be taken to their death. The seventh stage is extermination. It is called extermination because the victims are thought of as less than human. The victims are killed and put in mass graves or burnt. Denial is the last stage. In this stage, "the mass graves are dug up and hidden. The historical records are burned, or closed to historians. Even during the genocide, those committing the crimes dismiss reports as propaganda." Those who deny the genocide call themselves revisionists. Others take a more understated approach by claiming the reports are unproven or so-called because they come from unofficial source. They also claim that the victims' numbers are not as high as the perpetrators numbers. The prevention to genocide is to attack each stage of the genocidal process (Stanton, 1996). For Native Americans, genocide is still occurring in different ways, such as

taking Native children from their homes and putting them into foster care with non-native families. Such as the case in South Dakota where there are over seven hundred Native children taken away by state officials. (Bender, 2013). This is reminiscent of the boarding school era when children were taken from their families and removed to boarding schools hundreds of miles away.

Boarding Schools

The boarding school era has been described as what tore apart the fabric of the Native American family system. In 1868, President Ulysses S. Grant felt that there was still a problem with Indians so he declared that all Indian children go to school to learn English and do away with their languages. In 1879, Richard H. Pratt, an Army lieutenant founded Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. His slogan was "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." He also made sure that the children were in white homes over the summer to work and assimilate (Reyhner, 2013). Many children died as a result of disease and starvation in the boarding schools. Many other children were abused sexually, emotionally, and physically by the adults who were charged with their care. The boarding school model was introduced all over the country and included Canada. This barbaric act of assimilation has caused a generational epidemic of broken family systems among Native peoples. Not only did Natives suffer from the loss of their children, but also the loss of their land.

Stolen Lands

"Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. It will not even perish by flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to man and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals: therefore we cannot sell this land. It was put here for us by the Great Spirit and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to

us. You can count your money and burn it within the nod of a buffalo's head, but only the Great Spirit can count the grains of sand and the blades of grass of these plains. As a present to you, we will give you anything we have that you can take with you: but the land never” (Blackfeet Chief, recorded in a 19th Century Treaty Council).

This nation was built on millions of Native American lives and blood-soaked earth. It wasn't built on integrity and honesty, but on repression and lies. One piece of evidence is the largest U.S. government land grab in history, the Dawes Act of 1887. Passed on February 8, 1887, the Dawes Act broke up reservation lands into individual plots and was intended, in part, to assimilate Indians into US European- based society. Native people had four years to choose their own land. After four years, if no choice had been made, the federal government would choose for them. Citizenship would also be bestowed on to those Indians who deserted their traditional ways of life (Eder, 2013).

Methodology

Native Americans are certainly not the only culture who have experienced historical trauma. Africans experienced slavery because of the Europeans. The Jewish people experienced their holocaust via Adolf Hitler. Japanese-Americans experienced their internment due to the United States of America. Mayans in Guatemala suffered genocide at the hands of their own government as supported and funded by the U.S.A., just to name a few. There are commonalities between people of different cultures who have experienced historical trauma. As a result of these unjust actions, these cultures have experienced the effects of genocide, land loss, and racism. Genocide is something that each of the aforementioned cultures appear to have in common.

Due to the nature of this research project, I think that it was necessary to follow Indigenous qualitative methods. The population, interviewed was four persons from different

cultures. They were asked to convey their experiences and views of historical trauma. The story tellers incorporated their oral histories as oral story telling is a tradition. These personal oral histories give some insight, into other cultural traumas. The author viewed this as a collaboration of ideas between the researcher and the narrators based experience with historical trauma. The oral histories with the permission of the participants have been filmed, as opposed to an extensive written analysis paper, in order to present the long history and oratorical tradition of passing along historical events. Native orators tell stories of our history, culture, values and traditions which is how we disseminate information. I did not learn Native values and morality in textbooks. I learned them from my grandmother's and mother's stories. Oral history may not be thought of as a "true" history, a science, as research or "truth" like western academia is viewed, but for indigenous people, it is the fabric of our being. This passage by Margaret Kovach is one of my inspirations:

“Stories remind us of who we are and our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledge's while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral traditions, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations” (Kovach, 2009, p. 94).

Some ethical issues may have included the psychological welfare of the storytellers, but this was minimal due to their professions and awareness of the effects of historical trauma in their lives. The participants have reviewed their footage and approved or accepted the option to re-do their narrative. A limitation that might be considered is the time frame of the project. The dissemination of this research project will be in the care of the SKC psychology department. I provided a summation of the information presented by the speakers, but It is important for the

viewer to analyze the material separate from my input. Further literature reviews about other cultural historical trauma's may be considered, by the viewers i.e., Japanese-American, Jewish. The purpose of this research project is to educate viewers of the implications and consequences of historical trauma from some of these who lived it. Acknowledging what historical trauma is and how it affects people in these various cultures is an important step in the journey of healing. The hope is for the viewers to come to terms with their personal conflicts and to begin on the road to healing from HT also, to know they are not alone, as I discovered in my journey.

Researching historical trauma, I have come to the conclusion that it deserves acknowledgment and collective healing. HT requires respect and understanding from others and from the cultures that have experienced it. As a Native woman living in today's American society, I understand that I must be aware of all the implications and the effects that HT has on Native Americans and other cultures. The Native American Genocide means something different for each individual Native person, but the results may be the same for tribal nations as a collective. The acknowledgement of historical trauma is crucial to healing and in order to continue to move forward and to become healthy in every aspect of our lives, individually and collectively.

References

- Bender, A. (2013, June 3). *South Dakota commits shocking genocide against Native Americans*. Retrieved from People's World: www.peoplesworld.org/south-dakota-commits-shocking-genocide-against-native-americans
- Chief, B. (19th century). Land. (T. Council, Interviewer)
- Duran, E. &. (1995). *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*. Albany, NY, United States of America: State University of New York.
- Eder, J. (2013, April 12). *Eras/Dawes Act/ Dawes Act*. Retrieved from The American Inadian Experience: <http://americanindian2.abc-clio.com>
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous Methodologies*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Pilgram, D. (2012). *Jim Crow Museum*. Retrieved from Ferris State University: www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm
- Reyhner, J. (2013, April 12). *Eras / Dawes Act / Native People and Assimilation*. Retrieved from The American Mosaic: The American Indian Experience: <http://americanindian2.abc-clio.com>
- Stanton, G. H. (1996, February). *8 Stages of Genocide*. Retrieved from Genocide Watch: www.genocidewatch.org/8stagesofgenocide.html
- The United Nations. (1951, January 12). *Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Retrieved from Prevent Genocide International: www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm#II

Yellow Horse Braveheart, M. (2000). *Welcome to Takini's Historical Trauma*. Retrieved from
Historical Truma: www.historcaltrauma.com/home.html