

# Chapter 15

## Struggles With Historical Trauma: Cognitive Awareness and Native American Culture

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The chapter presents results from a qualitative phenomenological heuristic study of the perceptions of historical trauma across Native American nations. Historical trauma has been established as a by-product of cultural and physical suppression. Cultural psychology details the impact of an individual's culture on the psychological development of the individual. Therefore, by examining the change to the culture that resulted in historical trauma, determination could be made regarding how the individual was impacted. This research addressed these contentions by interviewing Native American persons from the Eastern and Northern nations of North America and Canada and determined how historical trauma had influenced their psychological development via symptoms they experienced. The research identified several areas that differed from the extant literature regarding the Eastern and Northern nations.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Culture is an intrinsic part of an individual's psychological development; as such, wounding of the culture results in wounding of the individual's psyche (Denham, 2008; Duran et al., 2008). Various cultures (e.g., American Indian, Jews) have suffered loss of their culture through physical and cultural genocide (Crawford, 2013; Ehlers et al., 2013; Goodkind et al., 2012; Gone, 2013; Waldram, 2013). For the American Indian, this loss of culture encompasses relocation to reservations, enforced attendance at boarding schools, removal of traditions, and outlawed ceremonies (Arndt & Davis, 2011; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Gone 2013, 2013a; Walls & Whitbeck, 2013; Weaver, 1998, 2000, 2001). Additionally, many of the individuals in these cultures suffer survivor syndrome and/or survivor's child complex, both of

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which create anxiety and impulsivity (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Granbois & Sanders, 2012). There is indication of elevated alcohol/chemical dependency, child abuse, homicide, unintentional injury, poverty, and unemployment (Braveheart et al., 2012; Gone, 2013, 2013a). Additionally, there is evidence of increased physical challenges (e.g., heart disease, cancer, diabetes, chronic stress, cirrhosis of the liver and shorter life spans), nightmares, sadness, and increased suicidal ideations when compared to those that have not experienced survivor syndrome and/or survivor's child complex (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Granbois & Sanders, 2012; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012). Others show signs of disenfranchised grief, which Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) and Evans-Campbell (2008) described as grief that cannot be openly acknowledged or mourned in public. When combined, survivor syndrome and disenfranchised grief create historical trauma (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Historical trauma (also called intergenerational historical trauma), is defined as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across a person's life and across generations (Brave Heart, 2003; Crawford, 2013; Gone, 2013, 2013a, 2014; Granbois & Sanders, 2012; Kristianto, 2013; Lajimodiere, 2012; Nebelkopf et al., 2011; Trembinski, 2011; Waldram, 2013; Walls & Whitbeck, 2013; Wright et al., 2011). Unfortunately, historical trauma has become part of the historical consciousness, which is defined as an awareness of the past, of the Jews in Europe and the American Indian population (Arndt & Davis, 2011; Brave Heart, 1998; Jervis et al., 2006). However, Jervis et al. (2006) have also stated memories transcend the individual and intergenerational boundaries, meaning; the memories continue generationally, and individuals remember them through stories and life experiences. Thus, this suffering has become a fundamental and ongoing part of many individual lives. James and Renville (2013) supported the contention that the memories are intergenerational stating that the children's brains have been rewired for survival, which is based on historical trauma. There are more recent findings that indicate that trauma affects the DNA of the individual, and that the altering of the DNA is generationally passed forward (Yehuda, et al. 2015).

Historical trauma often results in historical traumatic response, which is defined as a collection of features precipitated by historical trauma, including sadness, self-destructive behaviors, low self-esteem, suicidal ideations, rumination, anger issues, and a general inability to express emotion (Goodkind et al., 2012; Jacob, 2012; Sarche & Whitesell, 2012; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012; Ward, 2013). Historical traumatic response aligns with many of the diagnostic criteria for psychological disorders such as dysthymic disorder, major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Yehuda et al. (2001) found an increase in depressive disorders in the children of parents who had been exposed to trauma as holocaust survivors. Additionally, Evans-Campbell (2008) indicates that there is a risk of physical health problems, impaired family communication and interaction, and a total breakdown of traditions and ceremonies.

Researchers have established historical trauma as a by-product of cultural and physical suppression/genocide (Brave Heart et al., 2012). Thus far, research has examined the Apache, and Lakota; however, exploration of the lived experience of the above stated symptoms outside these specific populations is lacking (Evans-Campbell, 2008). There is little or no exploration of historical trauma among the Eastern and Northern nations and it was not known what it was like to live and experience the above-mentioned symptoms as a Native American person. It was possible the experiences would be the same regardless of the traditions or ceremonies practiced by the individual. Therefore, by exploring historical trauma individually, across the different nations within the blanket term Native American, a clearer understanding of historical trauma and its effect on the American Indian population was obtained. Brave Heart (2003) stated that the exploration of historical trauma is critical for a clearer understanding of how historical

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