

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA in Aboriginal communities

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The Proposition

That the patterns of human responses to disasters, particularly in protracted traumas such as war-zones, show strong parallels to the contemporary patterns of responses articulated by Aboriginal people affected by colonization and ongoing traumatic experience in Australia.

In this session

- What is 'Collective Trauma'?
- Aboriginal experience
- Why name Collective Trauma?
- Kath's story
- Responding

What is 'Collective Trauma'?

Kai Erikson 1976 'Disaster at Buffalo Creek.'

'a blow to the tissues of social life that damages the bonds linking people together...'
... which works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it...
....such that it does not have the quality of suddenness usually associated with the word trauma.
....a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as a source of nurturance and that part of the self has disappeared.'

Distinction between Individual and Collective Trauma

- Interconnected, but distinct
- 'it is difficult for people to recover from individual trauma when the community on which they have depended is fragmented.' Kai Erikson:
- Analysis at the individual level undervalues the disruption of social norms and collective meanings. Decline in social connection and social embeddedness explains much of mental health consequences following disasters.' Ajdukovic (former Yugoslavia war-zones)

Human-made, protracted trauma

'more fundamental and lasting social consequences of trauma occurred as a result of the chronic war, with changes much more prominent than those following the tsunami.

Somasundaram (Sri Lanka)

Elements of Collective Trauma

- Erosion of basic trust
 - deep mistrust of self, others, even family
- Breakdown of social norms
 - including family violence and sexual abuse
 - blurring of victim and victimizer
- Re-traumatization
 - repeating the traumas of the past even to the extent of bringing them upon ourselves
 - self-harm, substance misuse, reduced self-care.....

Ratnavale 2007

Lowitja O'Donoghue

'Aboriginal culture has been subjected to the most profound shocks and changes. It is a history of brutality and bloodshed. The assault on Aboriginal people includes massacres, diseases, dispossession and dispersal from land... I cannot overstate the traumatic consequences of policy and the destruction of Aboriginal community life that resulted.'

National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well Being 2004-2009

Guiding principles:

- ~ holistic view of health
- ~ essential need to support self-determination
- ~ culturally valid understandings of health
- ~ recognise the impact of trauma, grief, loss, discrimination and human rights issues

National Strategic Framework 2004-2009

Social & emotional well being problems:

~grief, loss, trauma, abuse, violence, substance misuse, physical health problems, gender identity, incarceration, family breakdown.....

Mental health problems:

~crisis reactions, anxiety states, depression, post-traumatic stress, self-harm and psychosis.....

Why name 'Collective Trauma'?

From Disaster literature:

- ~ mass trauma, cultural trauma, collective trauma, social trauma...
- ~ trans-generational trauma

From Psychiatric literature:

- ~ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- ~ (Complex Traumatic Stress Disorder)

	Individual	Population
One-off	PTSD Eg exposure to rape, time-limited exposure to war (veterans)	Mass Trauma, Collective Trauma. Eg Natural disasters, such as tsunami, earthquakes, floods, bushfires. Human disasters such as 9/11.
Ongoing	Complex Traumatic Stress Trans-generational Trauma - often defined in adulthood as 'Borderline Personality Disorder' - particularly if exposure begins in early childhood. eg ongoing childhood sexual abuse, ongoing experience of family violence	Collective Trauma Eg War-zones, civilians and children, Colonization, Genocide.

Why name 'Collective Trauma?'

- The way we define a problem shapes the way we seek solutions. Collective context-> collective healing
- Allows shift away from focus on the individual. PTSD diagnosis has limited relevance for Aboriginal communities and treatment guidelines don't fit.
- Supports Aboriginal descriptions of health and healing in terms of relatedness, connections and collective experience.

Why name 'Collective Trauma?'

- Moves beyond trauma models that describe individual victims and individual perpetrators-> such models can compound situations which pit Aboriginal men and woman, and families against each other.
- Allows linking of local interventions to integrated, evidence-informed practice.
- Supports advocacy for coordinated planning, resourcing and accountability

Colonization as trauma

- 'Colonization' was not a moment.
- 'Colonizing practices' are part of recent and contemporary experience for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people in Australia

Kath's story

- Grew up in DV household- watched mother get flogged most days. Mother worked to escape violence and drank all weekend. Kids would get lined up and get the strap for any little thing from father.
- Mother went to Welfare about DV- told (by Aboriginal worker) to get back to husband or all her children would be taken away.
- Sexual abuse of brothers and sisters as children by relatives- mother unable to acknowledge it. Family secrets.
- Mother was touched wrong way by grandson when he came out of prison, and she drank even more up until she died.

Kath's story

- One of 9 children, last of 4 daughters alive.
- Two older sisters died in their 40s and older brother died on 40th birthday. All used alcohol heavily.
- Older sister's first son hanged himself in prison when he was 23. Her next daughter hanged herself at age 24 at home in front of younger children.
- Younger sister gang-raped on 21st birthday. Committed suicide at age 32, two months after brother died.

Kath's Story

- Kath grew up next sister's children while she was off drinking. She says they all have mental problems and drinking and marijuana.
- The 16 year old has Type 2 diabetes, panic and anxiety attacks- won't get help.
- Kath has been trying to get help for her two teenage sons, who since age 11 have been beating her up for money and not going to school because of gangs there.

Kath's Story

' I'm proud of being a goddam Aboriginal woman!'

'I'm proud to have had a mother and a father. I am so grateful that I *know* my people- it doesn't matter that they were alcoholic.'

Current Responses

- Diagnostic limitations- PTSD, Personality disorders, substance misuse co-morbidity, anxiety disorders...
- National Framework: Evidence suggests that Aboriginal people find accessing mainstream MH services 'a difficult and in some cases a traumatic experience.'
- Judy Atkinson in Trauma Trails: 'not one of the participants in the study was able to name a positive outcome they had experienced with mental health professionals.'
- only 38% Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services have a MH or SEWB worker. (Tom Calma, HREOC, 2007):
- Some excellent programs reliant on energetic individuals and self-directed learning. Recipe for burn-out and fragmentation

Responding to Collective Trauma ~ Five Essential Elements

- Promote sense of safety
- Promote calming
- Promote sense of self-efficacy and collective efficacy
- Promote connectedness - building relationships to family, community, land, spirit
- Promote hope

Hobfoll et al 2007

Responding to Collective Trauma ~ Services and Whitefellas

- 'It's all about relationship'
- Get out of the clinics
- 'Leave your degrees in the office'
- Home-based
- Family-based and community-based
- 'Healing centres' and other safe places
- Community-based interventions, including children
- Issues very similar for urban, rural and remote
- Integrate with practical support
- Reflect on daily whitefella colonizing practices