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The Native American Population's Psychological Wellness and How to Address It

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Abstract

Native Americans have been treated immorally for centuries. This treatment began with Christopher Columbus forcing so many Natives out of their homes and moving somewhere else strange and unfamiliar. In addition to forcibly moving natives from their homes, Columbus also ordered a genocide of these Natives. These people were unfamiliar and strange and clearly this frightened the Europeans. This is just one of many examples of the mistreatment Native Americans received in the 15th century, and it was unfortunately only the beginning.

The Native Americans faced many battles filled with bloodshed of their own people, they were killed and scalped for sport, and the boarding school era. Children were taken from their native homes and families, only to be dropped into an unfamiliar school where they were going to “learn how to be civilized”. Their hair was cut, their names were changed, ultimately resulting in the eradication of their own identities. Their own cultures and customs were forgotten, and so many Native American languages and traditions were lost through this terrible boarding school era. In fact, an estimated 95% of the Indigenous population in the United States was lost after the European colonists (Barkan, 2003; Grayshield, Rutherford, Salazar, Mihecoby, Luna, 2015).

The physical damages from these events can remain, but the psychological damage is what endures, and can last a lifetime. Many Native Americans suffer from psychological effects from these past experiences, some disorders more prevalent than others, but many of them go unnoticed. Due to this lack of awareness, some turn to other means of ‘self-medicating’ such as alcohol and drugs, which is clearly an unhealthy way of dealing with this damage. These people

should be receiving proper help, ideally from a professional and not from a bottle. This lack of awareness and support to the Native American population is not just their fault, but us as a human population as well. We should be assisting each other wherever it is needed, especially when it comes to mental health.

Discussion

Clearly many immoral acts have been committed against Natives, but these numerous acts have resulted in a select few psychological disorders common within Native communities. Although there is not a wide variety of types of psychological disorders among them, the few disorders that are common are very impactful. The most prominent disorder that has been found is known as historical trauma. Historical trauma is defined as: “unresolved trauma resulting in grief that continues to impact the lives of survivors and subsequent generations” (Brave Heart, DeBruyn, 1998; Duran, Duran, Brave Heart, 1998). It is believed that this type of distress was formed from several factors: a major one being internalization of oppression. Native Americans were taught years and years ago to be ashamed of their culture and who they are as a people, and unfortunately this is still somewhat true today. This unresolved trauma can be passed on from generation to generation, making this type of trauma different from others, and creating much more of an effect across a wider group of people. Historical trauma has even been compared to PTSD due to Erik Erikson’s similar findings with the Native American community. Erikson noted a similar psychological process between those returning from World War II, and Native Americans who had been apart of the intense reservation relocation (French, 2000, p. 69). Erikson attributed this similar psychological process due to internalizing such trauma, that only

the ones who had gone through the same experience could relate to. This unhealthy internalization of trauma led to some dreadful impacts among Native American communities.

To find out what kind of impact this trauma is creating, researchers Grayshield, Rutherford, Salazar, Mihecoby, and Luna interviewed several respected elders from different Native American communities and asked them three questions in regards to historical trauma. The second question they asked was: “how is HT affecting their families and communities today?” (2015). After asking many elders this question, it was noted that three major impacts emerged: “alcoholism/other substance abuse, loss of culture and language, and community discord as a symptom of historical trauma” (Grayshield, Rutherford, Salazar, Mihecoby, Luna, 2015). Participant 7 recalled what their childhood was like, noting that there was “nothing but violence, sexual abuse, all those things that go with alcoholism.” Participant 10 brought up drug usage in younger generations: “they’re not only drinking, they’re doing drugs, and out here they’re even making those things. It’s everywhere.” These younger generations grow up around their parents, or other relatives, drinking and using drugs to ease the psychological pain. Kids look to their parents for advice, and how to act properly in society, and if this is what kids are growing up around, of course they are going to copy their parents’ behaviors.

The second impact was a loss of culture and language, much of it attributed to forced assimilation (Grayshield, Rutherford, Salazar, Mihecoby, Luna, 2015). Participant 2 noted, “our language now is a dying breed. Once our language dies, we die.” It is evident that traditions, culture, and language is each tribe’s beating heart; it is vital and allows growth within the communities. Much of this loss of culture and language is a result of the infamous boarding school era. This all began with President Ulysses Grant’s “Peace Policy” of 1869, which justified

taking thousands of Native American children away from their families and homeland to be put into religious and government boarding schools (Pember, 2007). Here, children were punished for even muttering a word of their native language. Such punishments included beatings, cleaning their mouths out with lye soap, and ‘imprisoning’ them in small, dark rooms without any food. These boarding schools not only harmed these children physically, but changed their view of themselves. Boarding schools “effectively taught Native people to view themselves as a subclass within White American society” with some kids expressing “feelings of loss and detachment from self and family while at the schools, as well as a deep level of low self-esteem of ‘never being good enough’. They also expressed anger and resentment at having to care for younger peers” (Pember, 2007). These children that grew up in an environment without any intimacy or family structure, lack basic human interactions. Therefore they are unfamiliar with family structure and how to properly care for another human being. They can grow up full of anger and violence, resulting in them never reproducing to carry on their generation. This lack of reproduction only contributes to the loss of culture and language within Native American communities. At one particular boarding school, Carlisle Indian Industrial School, their motto was to “kill the Indian, save the man” and they did just that during this dreary era. Some students who attended these schools can recall not just beatings, but sexual abuse as well throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s (Pember, 2007), which was not too long ago in our nation’s history. Even more recently, the National Center for American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research has “reported that all of the 185 residential and day schools are plagued with a lack of funding and substance abuse and suicide among students” (Pember, 2007). Even schools run by the reservations themselves are not getting enough attention from the government.

The last impact of historical trauma among Native Americans has resulted in community discord. Many of the elder participants who were interviewed spoke of violence and fighting within communities, resulting from historical trauma and having to internalize it. Participant 10 said, “people are not as happy as they used to be because of all the things that are going on, like fighting over water, people wanting this, and some people don’t want this. I don’t know. It’s just awful how we live today.” This fairly new tendency of fighting over things, such as water, could be contributed to the government trying to ‘reimburse’ the Natives for what we have done, beginning many many years ago. This has caused some Natives to look at land and water differently; instead of belonging to everyone, now it has to belong to *one* particular tribe, or people. Participant 2 added to this idea: “people used to get along to survive, but now everyone is jealous of everyone else, because some have things and some don’t.” Internalization of historical trauma can often result in violent/angry tendencies as an outlet, and this is why we are seeing a lack of harmonization within Native American communities.

With all this intense buildup of repressed emotions and thoughts, there needs to be some sort of outlet for all these emotions and thoughts to go; that is where ‘self-medicating’ comes into play. A major outlet for this internalization within Native communities is alcoholism. According to Women’s Health, the highest rates of binge drinking and drunk driving incidents occur within the Native American and Alaskan Native communities, and “both alcohol and drugs have been linked to increases in injuries, violence and mental health problems including suicide.” It has been proven that there is a higher chance of family issues, physical assaults, and higher rates of accidents and financial problems if a family member is abusing alcohol and or drugs, proven through a study conducted by the Canadian AODS in 1989. This means that

children who are around alcoholic relatives can grow up with unstable families, and possibly follow in their footsteps of alcohol abuse. Alcoholism has become such a prominent issue associated with Native American communities, that even some Natives themselves use alcoholism as a characteristic trait of being a Native. In a book published by the American Psychological Association, a Native of the Fort Belknap Indian reservation in Montana recalls an incident where this occurs. He was up for reelection tribal chairman, when at the council meeting, his "Indianness" was brought into question by a few members: "A heated exchange ensued in which the former chairman's opponents ultimately grounded their challenges, on the fact that he had not been raised in an alcoholic home and had not himself become an alcoholic" (Gone, 2006, p. 56). Assuming to be an 'authentic' Indian, you had to have either grown up around alcoholism, or become an alcoholic yourself. This only proves the unhealthy, and unfair stigma that surrounds Native American communities and how they behave and interact with one another. Young Natives with behavioral or drug abuse can be sent to juvenile facilities on some reservations. However, "only ten are juvenile detention facilities, while thirty-six of the remaining sixty-three jails have been juvenile beds. Hence there are only 256 juvenile beds within ten facilities within Indian country. Most of these facilities are in poor condition, with capacities of only ten to twenty inmates, and have few clinical intervention programs to serve the other six hundred thousand Native American youth" (French, 2000). Evidently, even today there is not enough government funding or any funding whatsoever to help those in need of it. If we could help the younger generation, there would be a better chance of completely eradicating these destructive behaviors within Native American communities, and getting rid of the stigma

that surrounds these communities as well. But, it has to start with a major shift in how much funding we give to these facilities in order to be of aid.

Instead of turning to temporary solutions for a permanent problem, troubled Native Americans should be seeking, *and* receiving proper ways to cope. There are many different ideas and routes in which aid can be offered. One book elaborates on the ways professionals and practitioners can be of service when dealing with historical trauma in Natives. Joseph P. Gone (2006), reminds professionals to keep in mind that this psychological trauma is specific to their people only, and should not be generalized in any way; their experiences are apart of their culture identity now, and this should be kept in mind when offering help in order to ensure a productive healing process (p. 72). In an article written in 1989 in *Human Organization*, more than fifty Native American substance-abuse treatment programs were viewed for a ten-year period. Within this study, four common factors were identified: “(1) they were all generated by natives themselves; (2) they all had charismatic role models, who provided direction to the program; (3) they all involved the recovering native in therapy and interaction with the group, both as clients and healers; (4) they all saw themselves as social entities- a community structure alternative to the drinking culture” (Weibel-Orlando). It seems to be that the most proven route for healing this trauma is within the Native American communities; with workers from within the community, and helping those who are in trouble to realize they are apart of the bigger picture. Community is valued among Native Americans, and when one realizes their actions are hurting others and disabling the community from growth and moving forward, they are more able to see the error of their ways. Jesse J Morris (2014) calls this type of healing ‘collateral damage and collateral healing’; the collateral damage being those who were affected by the

individual's destructive tendencies. Morris elaborates on this: "It is a must to fully review with the client all of those involved in their personal choices and life's path and determine the extent of the damage before the healing process can begin" "...Full recognition of the collateral damage needs to occur in order for the person to begin to see completely the extent of the damage they have inflicted for healing to start" (2014). Another facet to be explored in the healing process is the spiritual aspect, another important feature usually valued by Native American communities. This can include the use of "sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, fasting, talking circles, give away and other forms of spiritual healing and communication unique to the community with elders and spiritual leaders" (Morris, 2014). By implementing valued aspects among Native Americans into different healing programs, they are more apt to make changes in their lives.

Conclusion

It is evident that Native Americans have been neglected for years. It is time to finally end this trend, and pay more attention to those who need it. We can help the healing process by implementing the traditions that belong to each particular tribe, and using those to help them feel more attached to their culture and people around them. As well as keeping in mind the collateral healing approach; helping clients realize how much their ruinous tendencies have affected those around them. Bringing this into perspective can change a person's outlook on their habits, and motivate them to start their healing journey to make productive changes in their own lives. There is a need of awareness of those Natives who seek healing, and need help along the way. No longer should the motto "save the man, kill the Indian" exist; instead, the motto should be "save the Indian".

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