Historical Trauma and Cultural Losses

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American Indian (AI) Health and Mental Health Today

- First and foremost: acknowledge Tribal and community diversity; overall “rates” must be interpreted with caution.
- Health/Mental Health Disparities for AI/AN’s in the U.S.
  - Disproportionate death rates due to:
    - Alcoholism (550% higher)
    - Diabetes (200% higher)
    - Suicide (60% higher)
  - Source: Indian Health Service, 2007

How are we to explain such disparities?

A social determinants of health approach...
Historical Trauma, Defined

- “The cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across multiple generations, including trauma experienced in one’s own lifespan, which emanates from massively traumatized group history.”
  - (M.Y.H. Brave Heart)

- Three distinguishing characteristics:
  1. Trauma is widespread and many people either experienced or were affected by the events
  2. Generates high levels of collective contemporary distress and mourning
  3. The events are usually perpetrated on a group and their environment by outsiders with purposeful intent
    - (Walters, et al. Evans-Campbell, 2008)

“How historical” only in its roots; the effects and oppression are ongoing and continue to impact health.

How does HT “work”?  

Various conceptual models (Walters, et al., 2011):

- 1) HT as an etiological agent
- 2) HT as an outcome (e.g., historical or colonial trauma response)
- 3) HT as a mechanism for intergenerational transmissions of problem behaviors
- 4) HT-related stressors.
HT as an etiological agent

- Lived HT experiences may contribute to PTSD, grief, depressive symptoms, etc.
- Illustration... 

Clinical reports and research with Lakota families suggests that Indian parents raised in boarding schools feel inadequate/overwhelmed by parenting role
- Descendants of initial boarding school attendees report neglect and abuse in childhoods and confusion over how to raise children in a healthy way (Brave Heart & Colleagues)

Recent Empirical Evidence
HT as a mechanism for intergenerational transmissions of problem behaviors

- Life Course Perspectives
  - Linked Lives: explains the ways that experiences and events affecting one generation influence subsequent generations' development ("rippling out" effect)
  - Negative events/turning points may negatively impact the person who experiences it; in turn:
- (Key Mediating Processes): Parents with poorer mental health/substance use problems tend to be less warm, more disengaged and inconsistent in caretaking (Goodman & Gotlib, 1999; Lovejoy et al., 2000; reviews; Walls, et al., 2006)
- Illustration...

Relocation Legislation

- Here, references 1950’s government legislation to relocate Native families in large cities (note also termination, removal, and relocation such as Trail of Tears earlier in history)
- “Voluntary” (with pressure!) removal of families w/ promise for training and employment
- Reality: low-paying, seasonal work, minimal training, all in the absence of cultural strengths that remained on reservations

HT-related stressors

- Historical Cultural Losses as historically anchored contemporary sources of stress
- Measurement items created via focus groups with elders and community members
Contemporary Social Determinants

- Many current social forces have been impacted by historical events, policies, and processes

Reservation Characteristics/Social Determinants of Health

- High unemployment, extreme poverty, isolated and remote locations, and inadequate educational opportunities are an unfortunate reality of most U.S./Canadian reservations and reserves
- Obesity, CVD, and Diabetes: “food deserts,” commodities

Public health and sociological literature focus on such characteristics as risk factors for poor health outcomes

Traditional Cultural Involvement: Protective Effects

- Mediating Effects
  - Discrimination and Enculturation
- Alcohol Cessation and Traditional Indigenous Spirituality
- Global Measures & Suicidality (youth)
- A path to healing:
  “...A reclamation of Indigenous heritage, identity, and spirituality...would neutralize the pathogenic effects of colonization.” (Gone, 2009)