

A psychoanalytic exploration of collective trauma among Indigenous Australians and a suggestion for intervention

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Objective: *Psychoanalysis is used to explore the effects of the annihilation of culture and how this leads to a loss of identification with a collective subjectivity and triggers catastrophic symptoms including loss of collective hope, the rise of addictive and self-destructive behaviours, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma among Indigenous Australian communities.*

Conclusions: *I propose restorative educational interventions for young Indigenous children that seek to engage them with ancestral memory, cultural narratives, and a sense of purpose so that healing from historically transmitted trauma may be initiated and a grounded sense of subjectivity restored.*

Key words: *Aboriginal trauma, collective trauma, intergenerational trauma, restorative interventions.*

The end of life as we know it is surely unimaginable for most of us as we get up each day and make the assumption that the world will go on as usual. One of the reasons that the Bosnian War, and particularly the siege of Sarajevo, produced such shock among white dominant culture people was perhaps a recognition that everyday life could be annihilated for people like themselves. I suspect that fewer dominant culture white people had that reaction to the Khmer Rouge massacres in Cambodia, to the genocide in Rwanda, or even to the legions of destitute black people perched on rooftops or ensconced in squalor in the Louisiana Superdome during the Hurricane Katrina debacle. The recent outrage at Germaine Greer's essay on the historical origins of rage among Aboriginal men illustrates how difficult it is for some dominant culture white people to step outside of their own experience to empathize with people whose life experiences are different from their own.^{1,2} White Australians might respond this way either because of an inherent belief in their own superiority or because they use denial or blame in response to their feelings of guilt over colonization. The chasm between whitefella and blackfella can be very wide indeed.

Decolonizing mindsets

To understand the argument I propose here, therefore, demands a decolonized mindset. It requires entertaining the possibility that all groups subscribe to collective subjectivities, and that the annihilation of a group's collective subjectivity is likely to have catastrophic consequences. This point is illustrated by Jonathan Lear's study of the Crow Nation.^{3,4} Drawing on historical material, Lear examined the status of the Crow Nation at the time of westward expansion in the US. He describes how the elimination of the buffalo herds, along with a federal prohibition on intertribal warfare, undermined the *raison d'être* of the tribe. Male members of the tribe could

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no longer be warriors, and this, coupled with geographic dislocations and descent into poverty left the tribe without any meaningful purpose for its existence. The catastrophic collapse of the Crow way of life led to annihilation of the possibilities of Crow subjectivity. As Lear poignantly expressed it, by 1940 one could pose the question: Among the Crow, is there a Crow?

Narratives: trauma and healing

Fraiberg *et al.* offer compelling evidence as to how individual trauma is transmitted intergenerationally. Describing the case of a depressed mother, Fraiberg *et al.* sum up the process this way: “(T)he sad and distant face of the mother was mirrored in the sad and distant face of the baby. The room was crowded with ghosts” (p. 172).⁵ The literature on intergenerational trauma is replete with images of ghosts, spectres, and phantoms.^{6,7} With respect to intergenerational trauma, the notion of ‘speakability’ is particularly important. Rosenman and Handelsman focus on the nature of collective narrative, or, as they term it, ‘group story’, suggesting that the kind of collective narrative a group creates has a profound influence on the subjective sense of being of group members. If, after catastrophe, a group is unable to construct a coherent, forward-looking vision – a narrative of radical hope, in Lear’s terms – then the prospects for the group are diminished and real danger emerges: “An unreal, garbled story tends to freeze the group in time; it impedes mourning over the losses and cathecting the humiliations suffered in past catastrophes” (p. 38).⁸

Speaking of the kinds of symptoms one might expect from people carrying around frozen ancestral trauma, Kaplan lists many symptoms including school phobia, agoraphobia, sadness, weeping, self-mutilation, and psychosomatic symptoms.^{9,10} In the absence of an understanding of the sociohistorical base of collective trauma symptoms such as gasoline sniffing, alcohol and drug addiction, domestic violence, suicidality, and sexual abuse are typically regarded by society at large as symptoms of individual pathology, thereby providing a rationale for punitive, militaristic and coercive interventions of the kind recently initiated in the Northern Territory.¹¹

Kaplan says that it is the lethal combination of the uncanny attunement that a child must have to parental emotional states in order to survive, with the silence of a parent burdened either by shame, fear or loathing, or perhaps by ancestral phantoms of which they are not aware, that produces in the child the incapacity to speak about their own emotional experiences. This then leads to the development of severe trauma symptoms. Healing ‘phantomically’ traumatized children, therefore, requires resuscitating the capacity for speech and the revivification of narrative capabilities in the adults of a traumatized community so that, ultimately, as parental ghosts are

exorcised, their children can be freed of their ghostly burdens and become well. If this is not done, we can expect the adults to act out their unconscious trauma and thereby perpetuate the damaging cycle of unprocessed trauma for another generation.

Davoine and Gaudillière analyze this issue from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective.¹² They argue, as do Read *et al.*,¹³ that disorders commonly considered psychiatric, such as schizophrenia and psychosis, may be induced through the severance of social links and the transmission across generations of unmetabolized trauma. Davoine and Gaudillière suggest that supposedly oppositional, pathological or deviant behaviours may well be unconscious responses to culturally transmitted trauma or to the lack produced in people whose subjectivities have been annihilated. People who have had their experience of their histories foreclosed through, for example, cultural genocide or geographic displacement, will live with lack, but are likely to be unaware of the causes of the absence within. They argue that severe psychic symptoms in the present are potentially symptoms of frozen trauma desperately seeking to be voiced. Naming requires an acknowledgement of the unnameable within, a silent spectral realm of anguish.

Speaking the unspoken

From a psychoanalytic perspective, then, the question that the anguish of an individual or community raises is an archeological one. It pertains precisely to what in their history has led to the current breakdown in individual subjectivity and in the group’s capacity to construct a future-oriented collective narrative. How might we enable such groups to enter history and speak the unspoken that has so profoundly shaped their individual and collective experiences? In what way might the dead of our ancestral and spectral pasts live on within all of us?^{14–16} Who is equipped and willing to take on the responsibility of serving as what Davoine and Gaudillière call a ‘guarantor’ that those ancestral experiences will be given voice from now on?

Davoine and Gaudillière argue that “dehistoricization of experience” (p. 47), for instance through geographic dislocations, forced removals and cultural genocide, is particularly traumatic as it causes people to lose the social link with their pasts. They suggest that we must assist such people in “regaining a foothold in history” (p. 47). Drawing on Wittgenstein, they employ the concept of petrification, arguing that people’s bodies can be so numbed by trauma that, as Wittgenstein said, “I turn into stone and my pain goes on”. The authors note that children are particularly susceptible to noticing the blank affect of petrified adults and are likely to absorb that pain into themselves, ‘becoming’, as they note, “the subject of the other’s suffering” (p. 49). This is how trauma is transmitted intergenerationally both within families and in whole communities. As to the psychosocial effects of such a calamity,

Davoine and Gaudillière are very clear: “Our patients are perpetuating such a hell, one that continues on in the anesthesia of several generations ... these descendants may manifest only an omnipresent shame, unalloyed misfortune, a sense of radical injustice, and a global sadness, all these being signs of an imminent catastrophe that they can neither name nor dispel (p.50)”.¹²

For example, bridging the gap between trauma theory and healing practices, Atkinson identifies the absence of lore, a condition she refers to as ‘lorelessness’, as causing Indigenous people to be cast adrift without history, memory, or wellbeing. With respect to solutions, Atkinson invokes the Aboriginal concept of *dadirri*, a restorative form of listening with the following properties:

The principles and functions of *dadirri* are: a knowledge and consideration of community and the diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to community; ways of relating and acting within community; a non-intrusive observation, or quietly aware watching; a deep listening and hearing with more than the ears; a reflective non-judgmental consideration of what is being seen and heard; and having learnt from the listening, a purposeful plan to act, with actions informed by learning, wisdom, and the informed responsibility that comes with knowledge. (p. 16)¹⁷

What is distinctive about this approach is an emphasis on community and ancestral memory, which, for the most part, is conspicuously absent from Western therapeutic regimes. Atkinson advocates using reflective discussion and “storytelling, drawing, writing, dancing and drama, and Aboriginal cultural tools for healing” (p. 238).¹⁷ Atkinson suggests that Indigenous clients be encouraged to work collectively to make sense of their experiences and to understand the history of colonization within which their current suffering is embedded, an enterprise for which there are many precedents in Australian Indigenous literature and scholarly writing.^{18–20}

Restorative pedagogical work with children.

I share Hunter’s view that education has a potentially important role to play in creating restorative therapeutic possibilities for children.^{21,22} I believe that each Indigenous child has a culturally constituted unconscious and is thereby a bearer of the collective history of their people. Trauma in the unconscious may be unspeakable because of the severance of social links through devices such as residential schooling, fosterage, language prohibition and cultural genocide. This severance may continue to occur in the present or may be located in history. Teachers of Indigenous children need to be thoroughly familiar with the history and customs of the groups with whom they work – and ideally they should be members of those groups – and they should also be trained in understanding the workings of intergenerationally transmitted trauma so that they know how to recognize and address trauma symptoms.^{17,23}

Psychoanalysts have long recognized that a powerful agent of change in therapy is the presence of the analyst as witness and receiver of unconscious knowledge.²⁴ Teachers, too, ought to be prepared to receive such knowledge, and should understand how to evoke the unconscious in children through their own evocative presences. A teacher with a passion for myth, storytelling, drama, memory, and the wisdom of elders will draw these evocative knowledges into the classroom, and will elicit evocative responses from students that allow students to experience their own inner knowledges as namable and addressable. Important weight is given to ancestral memory, current emotion, the cultural and historical context of children’s lives, and the power of epistemologies and narrative modes that transcend delimited Western notions of logos, the kinds of reductionist learning that cannot be boiled down to answers on multiple choice tests.

If severance of social links comes from the foreclosure of history, then a major focus of curriculum ought to be on the regeneration of those links by assisting children in experiencing their latent historical subjectivities and in claiming a specific Indigenous identity. Reanimation of ancestral memories, and reconnection to latent pasts can be facilitated by drama, performance, participation in rituals, viewing of films, reading novels, poetry and myths, and by experiencing and retelling folklore. Recalling Judy Atkinson’s discussion of the condition of ‘lorelessness’, the challenge is to engage Indigenous children in narrative possibilities that allow for the construction of new lore. This is not the kind of reanimation of fossil knowledge that leaves children severed from an estranged past. Rather, working organically with Indigenous children and Indigenous elders, this is an opportunity to recreate a history that allows for pride, possibility, and a hopeful future.^{25–28} Curriculum, in this conceptualization, is an organic process that gets constructed with children and with community stakeholders for the children of that particular community.

Teachers might then consider themselves as documentarians of the collective unconscious of the community; documentarians of existing lore; and documentarians of the processes and products involved in constructing new forms of lore with children and community members. This, of course, can only occur with the active participation of community elders, and is unlikely to happen unless a shift away from the kind of centralized, standardized forms of schooling that serve to perpetuate the gulf between Indigenous children and their ancestral wisdom occurs. Neither can it occur at the hands of teachers who do not have sympathetic attunement to ancestral memory, who do not understand the connections between Indigenous spirit and the earth, or who simply lack respect for Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous ways of being in the world, and Indigenous kinship systems.

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