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## Historical Trauma: a special issue of Transcultural Psychiatry

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By Eugene Raikhel

The [latest issue of \*Transcultural Psychiatry\*](#) is devoted to the concept of “historical trauma” in studies of Indigenous peoples in North America. As Laurence J. Kirmayer, Joseph P. Gone, and Joshua Moses argue in their Introduction to the special issue:

“The notions of historical trauma, loss, and grief have drawn attention to the enduring effects of colonization, marginalization, and cultural oppression in the lives of Indigenous peoples and communities. The recognition that the violence and suffering experienced by one generation can have effects on subsequent generations provides an important insight into the origins of mental health problems. However, the kinds of adversity faced by each generation differ, and the construct of trauma does not capture many of the important elements that are rooted in structural problems, including poverty and discrimination. Understanding the ways in which trauma impacts mental health requires a broader view of identity, community, adaptation and resistance as forms of resilience,” ([Kirmayer, Gone and Moses 2014](#)).

The titles and abstracts of the articles are below. Whenever possible we have linked to pre-publication (PP) or other open-access (OA) versions of the articles.

### [Rethinking Historical Trauma](#) (OA)

*Laurence J. Kirmayer, Joseph P. Gone, and Joshua Moses*

Recent years have seen the rise of *historical trauma* as a construct to describe the impact of colonization, cultural suppression, and historical oppression of Indigenous peoples in North America (e.g., Native Americans in the United States, Aboriginal peoples in Canada). The discourses of psychiatry and psychology contribute to the conflation of disparate forms of violence by emphasizing presumptively universal aspects of trauma response. Many proponents of this construct have made explicit analogies to the Holocaust as a way to understand the transgenerational effects of

genocide. However, the social, cultural, and psychological contexts of the Holocaust and of post-colonial Indigenous “survivance” differ in many striking ways. Indeed, the comparison suggests that the persistent suffering of Indigenous peoples in the Americas reflects not so much past trauma as ongoing structural violence. The comparative study of genocide and other forms of massive, organized violence can do much to illuminate both common mechanisms and distinctive features, and trace the looping effects from political processes to individual experience and back again. The ethics and pragmatics of individual and collective healing, restitution, resilience, and recovery can be understood in terms of the self-vindicating loops between politics, structural violence, public discourse, and embodied experience.

[The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma](#)

*Amy Bombay, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman*

The current paper reviews research that has explored the intergenerational effects of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system in Canada, in which Aboriginal children were forced to live at schools where various forms of neglect and abuse were common. Intergenerational IRS trauma continues to undermine the well-being of today’s Aboriginal population, and having a familial history of IRS attendance has also been linked with more frequent contemporary stressor experiences and relatively greater effects of stressors on well-being. It is also suggested that familial IRS attendance across several generations within a family appears to have cumulative effects. Together, these findings provide empirical support for the concept of historical trauma, which takes the perspective that the consequences of numerous and sustained attacks against a group may accumulate over generations and interact with proximal stressors to undermine collective well-being. As much as historical trauma might be linked to pathology, it is not possible to go back in time to assess how previous traumas endured by Aboriginal peoples might be related to subsequent responses to IRS trauma. Nonetheless, the currently available research demonstrating the intergenerational effects of IRSs provides support for the enduring negative consequences of these experiences and the role of historical trauma in contributing to present day disparities in well-being.

["The trauma experienced by generations past having an effect in their descendants": Narrative and historical trauma among Inuit in Nunavut, Canada](#)

*Allison Crawford*

*"Sivulirijat aksururnaqtukkuurnikugijangat aktuiniqaqsimaninga kinguvaanginnut"* translates as "the trauma experienced by generations past having an effect in their descendants." The legacy of the history of colonialism is starting to take narrative shape as Inuit give voice to the past and its manifestations in the present through public commissions such as the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Inuit-led Qikiqtani Truth Commission. However, an examination of other discursive contexts reveals a collective narrative of the colonial past that is at times silent, incomplete or seemingly inconsistent. Reading the political narrative through the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, and the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut since its formation on April 1, 1999, exposes an almost complete silence about this history. Oral histories, an important form for the preservation and transmission of traditional cultural knowledge, do narrate aspects of this experience of contact, but in accounts that can appear highly individual, fragmented, even contradictory. In contrast, one domain that does seem to register and engage with the impacts of this history of colonialism is Inuit art, specifically visual art and film. In some cases these artistic narratives pre-date the historical trauma narratives of the commissions, which began with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in the mid-1990s. This paper examines these narrative alternatives for recounting historic trauma in Nunavut, while also considering the implications of understanding historical trauma as narrative.

[Healing history? Aboriginal healing, historical trauma, and personal responsibility](#)

*James B. Waldram*

What can an exploration of contemporary Aboriginal healing programs such as those offered in Canadian prisons and urban clinics tell us about the importance of history in understanding social and psychological pathology, and more significantly the salience of the concept of "historical trauma"? The form of

Aboriginal “healing” that has emerged in recent decades to become dominant in many parts of the country is itself a reflection of historical processes and efforts to ameliorate the consequences of what is today often termed “historical trauma.” In other words, contemporary notions of “healing” and the social, cultural, medical, and psychological disruption and distress caused by colonialism and captured in the term “historical trauma” have coevolved in an interdependent manner. I also argue that there is a tension between the attribution of this distress to both specific (e.g., residential schools) and generalized (e.g., colonialism) historical factors, as evident in the “historical trauma” concept, and the prevailing emphasis in many healing programs to encourage the individual to take personal responsibility for their situation and avoid attributing blame to other factors. I conclude that “historical trauma” represents an idiom of distress that captures a variety of historical and contemporary phenomena and which provides a language for expressing distress that is gaining currency, at least among scholars, and that the contemporary Aboriginal healing movement represents an effort to deal with the absence or failure of both “traditional” Aboriginal healing and government-sponsored medical and psychological services to adequately deal with this distress of colonialism.

[Reconsidering American Indian historical trauma: Lessons from an early Gros Ventre war narrative \(OA version\)](#)

Joseph P. Gone

Professional clinicians and human services providers are increasingly attributing the mental health problems of American Indians (AIs) to *historical trauma* (HT). As an alternative to established psychiatric disorders, AI HT was formulated to explain enduring mental health disparities as originating in tribal experiences of Euro-American colonization. As a result, AI HT has been described as the collective, cumulative, and intergenerational psychosocial disability resulting from massive group-based oppression, such as forced relocation, political subjugation, cultural domination, and genocide. One objective of the HT construct is to frame AI distress and dysfunction in social and historical terms. Given widespread indigenous experiences of colonization, the debilitating effects of HT are presumed to affect most AI communities today. With this background in mind, I explore AI HT

with specific reference to a “war narrative” obtained by an anthropologist in 1901 from an elderly Gros Ventre woman. In this account, Watches All described her participation in a historic intertribal battle, and her subsequent captivity and escape from the enemy during the late 1860s. This historical narrative references many first-hand experiences that would today be identified as traumatogenic. Interestingly, however, this account complicates several assumptions underlying AI HT, leading to vexing questions of whether Watches All’s ordeal actually qualifies as an instance of AI HT. No matter how one answers these questions, such ambiguity highlights serious theoretical confusions requiring elaboration and refinement if AI HT is to remain a useful construct in the behavioral health sciences.

[Historicizing historical trauma theory: Troubling the trans-generational transmission paradigm \(PP version\)](#)

*Krista Maxwell*

The premise that “trauma” is transmitted across generations is central to the historical trauma discourse currently circulating in indigenous communities and professional networks in Canada. Historical trauma may be understood as the offspring of two older and apparently antithetical discourses: Native healing, and colonial professional critiques of indigenous family life. While the former has maintained a therapeutic focus on restoring intergenerational social relations, the latter has pathologized indigenous parenting and child-rearing practices. The emergence of historical trauma marks a global shift in the moral economy by which victimhood status, acquired through individual experiences of physical and especially sexual abuse, has come to wield greater currency than collective struggles against colonialism. Providers of contemporary indigenous healing programmes are drawing simultaneously on trauma discourse, which is seen to legitimate individual social suffering, and older therapeutic forms centred on sharing local social histories to restore intergenerational continuities and collective identity. But these invocations of historical trauma may continue the colonial discourse of mental health and social welfare professionals, who blamed indigenous parenting practices for children’s social problems and failure to assimilate. Some contemporary mental health and child development professionals have invoked parents’ and grandparents’ transmission of

historical trauma in ways which construct indigenous families as pathological, promote an oversimplified, universalizing understanding of Canadian colonialism, and divert attention from the contemporary continuation of colonial structures and relations.

### [Historical trauma: Politics of a conceptual framework](#)

*Erica Prussing*

The concept of historical trauma (HT) is compelling: Colonialism has set forth cumulative cycles of adversity that promote morbidity and mortality at personal and collective levels, with especially strong mental health impacts. Yet as ongoing community-based as well as scholarly discussions attest, lingering questions continue to surround HT as a framework for understanding the relationships between colonialism and indigenous mental health. Through an overview of 30 recent peer-reviewed publications that aim to clarify, define, measure, and interpret how HT impacts American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) mental health, this paper examines how the conceptual framework of HT has circulated in ways shaped by interactions among three prominent research approaches: evidence-based, culturally relevant, and decolonizing. All define current approaches to AIAN mental health research, but each sets forth different conceptualizations of the connections between colonialism and psychological distress. The unfolding trajectory of research about HT reflects persistent tensions in how these frameworks interact, but also possibilities for better integrating them. These considerations aim to advance conversations about the politics of producing knowledge about AIAN mental health, and support ongoing calls for greater political pluralism in mental health research.

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