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**INTEGRATING HISTORY INTO HEALTHCARE: UNDERSTANDING LINKS  
BETWEEN PAST TRAUMAS AND CURRENT HEALTH DISPARITIES  
WITHIN THE NATIVE AMERICAN POPULATION**

by

Alison Gisi

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Program

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Department of Biology  
The University of South Dakota

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The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed  
to examine the thesis of Alison Gisi  
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## ABSTRACT

### INTEGRATING HISTORY INTO HEALTHCARE: UNDERSTANDING LINKS BETWEEN PAST TRAUMAS AND CURRENT HEALTH DISPARITIES WITHIN THE NATIVE AMERICAN POPULATION

Alison Gisi

Director: Dr. Melissa Dittberner

The byproducts and motivators of colonialism- namely acquisition of land, pursuit of power, and assimilation of non-dominant cultures- have created a long legacy of historical trauma within the American Indigenous population, who have been at the targets of discrimination and conflict since the onset of European colonization of the Americas. Generations of losses have victimized Native American people and has left them to pick up the pieces of what they lost to colonialism. Researchers and experts in the field have suggested that due to the extensive and unique Historical Trauma experienced by the population has initiated the Historical Trauma Response within survivors and their descendants alive today. One can determine a degree of causality between historical trauma, the historical trauma response, and many of the health disparities affecting Native American reservation communities and populations.

*Keywords:* Historical Trauma, Native American Health Disparities, Historical Trauma Response

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Limitations	v.
Acknowledgements	vii.
Introduction	ix.
Chapter 1: Historical Sources of Grief	1
A. People	
B. Land	
C. Culture	
Chapter 2: Psychological Impacts of Historical Grief	16
A. Historical Trauma	16
B. Historical Trauma Response	16
Chapter 3: Manifestations of the Historical Trauma Response as Health and Wellness Disparities	22
A. Substance Use	22
B. Depression & Suicide	23
C. Violence	24
D. Education, Poverty, & Employment	27
Conclusion	30
References	32

## LIMITATIONS

### Poor Generalizability

“Native American”, “American Indian”, “Native”, and “Indigenous” are similar although incredibly broad terms that can describe dramatically different cultures, and are used exclusively or interchangeably depending on individual or tribal preferences. The experiences, and history of Native Americans varies vastly depending on factors including but not limited to; the size of tribe, geographic location, food sources, and tribal affiliations. For these reasons, it is important to preface this project with the disclaimer that the experiences and responses detailed within are the experiences of some, but certainly not all Native Americans or Native American tribes.

### Data

Finding reliable and reputable data has been somewhat of a challenge over the course of this project. For one, due to the oral nature of many Native American traditions, there are few examples of written firsthand accounts or records of many of the traumatic events that occurred during the country’s infancy, and many of the numbers of lives lost to disease, war, and other violence are simply estimates. Additionally, due to the structure and role of Indian Health Services (IHS) as an office in the United States Government, there is an overlapping of data between that collected by the US government, and that collected by Indian Health Services. Even more uncertainty stems from the issue of identification of individuals as Native American-in other words, what “counts” as Native American on the United States census. Author Russel Thornton (1996) describes the issue

Many different criteria may be used to delimit a population. Language, residence, cultural affiliation, recognition by a community, degree of "blood," genealogical lines of descent, and self-identification have all been used at some point in the past to define both the total Native American population and specific tribal populations. Of course, each measure produces a different population, and the decision about which variables to use in defining a given population is an arbitrary one (para 4).

He also goes on to highlight some of the specific differences among tribes and the blood quantum they consider members of their tribe explaining,

Blood quantum requirements for membership in contemporary tribes vary widely from tribe to tribe (U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, unpublished data). Some tribes, such as the Walker River Paiute, require at least a one-half Indian (or tribal) blood quantum; many, such as the Navajo, require a one-fourth blood quantum; some, generally in California and Oklahoma, require a one-eighth, one-sixteenth, or one-thirty-second blood quantum; and many have no minimum blood quantum requirement, but require only a documented tribal lineage (Thornton, 1996, para 11).

For these reasons, it is clear why it may be difficult to collect and maintain consistent data of the Native American population. Issues of enrollment and identification only exacerbate problems with multiple agencies trying to communicate and a lack of formal written history.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### Reference to Native Americans in the Past Tense

Native Americans do not exist only in the past tense. Many times, in discussions about Indigenous culture and traditions the past dominates and the realities of today are ignored. This is not only incorrect, but it invalidates the experience of those who live today, carrying on the traditions of their ancestors. Although this paper speaks extensively on the loss of culture and way of life extensively in this paper, perpetuating the idea that Native American culture has been erased or destroyed is in no way the intention of this project. The persistence and devotion of Native people has allowed the culture to continue its influence despite all of the trauma, albeit in different ways. The Smithsonian museum of the American Indian (n.d). describes this issue by labeling Native Americans as having “living cultures that change over time”. This paper will highlight the ways in which aspects of Native American culture were lost and changed as a result of colonization and not to suggest that the culture is non-existent or has in any way been totally lost.

### Native Americans Untouched

In a project that is largely focused on negatives- the atrocities, injustices, and loss imposed upon Native people, as well as the health disparities threatening the population, it is necessary to call some attention to the positives- the fact that Native American history and culture is so much more than what we know and so much more than what could possibly be encapsulated in this paper. As important as it is to recognize the

impacts of history on the health of Native American people, one cannot do so without first acknowledging the beauty of the culture and heritage that defines them. European arrival is truly a definitive point in the history of Native Americans- before and after arrival are dramatically different realities. History has largely failed to recognize the impressively established culture that existed before European influence- the culture that nurtured the land that American's now call home, the culture that developed agricultural technologies still in use today, the culture that cared for its people with natural medicines and healings, and the culture that fights every day to hang on to its roots. A website called Digital History rewinds the tape of history, helping us to recognize the beauty of a thriving population and providing some insight into the culture and way of the lifestyles of pre-contact Native Americans...

During the thousands of years preceding European contact, the Native American people developed inventive and creative cultures. They cultivated plants for food, dyes, medicines, and textiles; domesticated animals; established extensive patterns of trade; built cities; produced monumental architecture; developed intricate systems of religious beliefs; and constructed a wide variety of systems of social and political organization ranging from kin-based bands and tribes to city-states and confederations. Native Americans not only adapted to diverse and demanding environments, they also reshaped the natural environments to meet their needs (Mintz & McNeil, 2018, para 5).

Native Americans had and continue to have an incredible impact. Their influence is far-reaching, and although it is unlike it was before colonization, Native American culture is very much alive and well today.

## Introduction

In recent years, health professionals have begun incorporating and appreciating the role of history in healthcare. All people are the products of not only their environments, but the environments of their parents, grandparents, and maybe even generations of ancestors before them. In this paper, a unique instance of historical population trauma as evident within the American Indian population will be discussed. Since the very beginning of colonialism in the United States, the Native American population has procured dramatic losses unlike those of any other ethnic group in history. A major percentage of population, land, and a significant amount of traditional culture and way of life were lost, resulting in generations of Historical trauma. Today, the symptoms of the historical trauma response including disenfranchised and unsanctioned grief, internalized oppression, and identification with the aggressor manifest as and contribute to the myriad of health and wellness disparities threatening the Native American population, and will most likely continue to influence generations to come.

## CHAPTER ONE: Historical Sources of Grief

### People

Although some debate exists due to the difficulty of quantifying a largely undocumented population, historians estimate that the Indigenous population in North America could have reached upwards of 60-100 million people in 1491, prior to European arrival (J. Turgeon-Drake, PowerPoint, 2021). Following expansion west, the Native American population had decreased to 600,000 in 1800, and about 250,000 in 1890, reducing the population by almost 95% over the course of only a few generations (Hacker & Haines, 2006). The rapid loss of the great majority of the population was significant for two reasons. Politically, it weakened Native Americans and their ability to defend against the US government, paving the way for future discrimination and injustice. Emotionally, it left an empty space in those who survived, those who were left to fight against ever-advancing colonialism and hold on to the vestiges of their culture.

### Disease

An online publication produced by The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) detailing the book *Guns, germs, and steel* by Jared Diamond asserts, “No medieval force, no matter how bloodthirsty, could have achieved such enormous levels of genocide. Instead, Europeans were aided by a deadly secret weapon they weren’t even aware they were carrying; Smallpox” (PBS, 2005, para 4). Smallpox and other communicable diseases had been common in Europe for centuries. Close contact with livestock had made it possible for animal diseases to attack humans, resulting in outbreaks of smallpox, measles, and influenzas that killed millions over the course of many centuries (PBS, 2005). However, despite the losses, with each outbreak came increased immunity- survivors got better and

better at fighting off infections and disease was not as big of a threat. At the same time, Indigenous peoples of North America, who were not working with domesticated animals to the same extent as Europeans, were not exposed to infections, and therefore were not building immunity against these diseases. Resultantly, exposure to these diseases following European arrival in the Americas was absolutely devastating to the Native American population who lacked the ability to fight infection. Mortality was widespread- germs and disease ravaged through entire tribes and left few survivors. In fact, PBS (2005) estimates that disease alone killed 90% of Native Americans, making it “the deadliest agent of conquest” (PBS, 2005, para 16).

### Slavery and Kidnapping

Lindford D. Fisher, an associate professor of history at Brown University states that Native American slavery is “...a piece of the history of slavery that has been glossed over” (Kiley, 2017, para 2). Immediately following European arrival to the New World, the slave trade began to include Indigenous people- men, women, and children, and was a booming industry for Europeans. (Resendez, 2016, as cited in Walters, Karina, 2022). Estimates range from 2- 5 million enslaved Native American men, women, and children in the Americas between 1492 and 1880. That number of course is in addition to the 12.5 million African slaves indentured during the same period. Native American slaves were often sold overseas, in what Fisher describes as an attempt to decrease the risk of “...having the native Americans run away to find refuge.” (Kiley, 2017, para 14). Fisher further expands on the various motivations for Native American enslavement, positing that slavery developed out of notions of European superiority and a colonial appetite for land.

## Scalping and Conflict

Scalping is a barbaric war and battle practice in which one removes the scalp from the head of their enemy, keeping it as a trophy or symbol of accomplishment (Brown, 2016). A tactic that is commonly misattributed to “savage” Native American tribes, scalping was actually over 2,000 years old in Europe, and in England it preceded the official settlement of North America by almost four centuries (Chavers, 2017). The first known North American scalp bounty was implemented in 1641 when Willem Kieft, then governor of Manhattan offered monetary payment for the scalps of Native American men, women, and children (Chavers, 2017). In 1703, The Massachusetts Bay Colony offered up to 60 pounds for each Indian scalp, and in 1724, the legislature of New Hampshire not only authorized the scalping of Indians but offered up to 100 pounds for each male scalp, 50 for the scalp of a woman, and half that for an Indian child (Chavers, 2017). Scalping bounties were motivated by a want to reduce the Native American population in hopes to ultimately expand territory and acquire more land. In his article on Scalping in America, Dr. Dean Chavers (2017) contends,

Both Indians and whites scalped each other, but whites got paid for it. Whites also did it to help the colonial legislature achieve their goal to exterminate all Indians and control their land budding in the United States (para 1).

Scalpers and “Indian Hunters” made fortunes off the scalps of Native Americans- a notorious outlaw named John Glanton collected over 500 scalps in his career, a number that would make him a millionaire today (Chavers, 2017). As quoted in Chavers (2017), Colonel John Chivington of the United States Army once said of the scalping mission,

“Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians. Kill and scalp all, big and little; nits make lice” (para 8).

## Land

In his 1821 Inaugural address, United States president James Monroe said about Native Americans, “America’s westward growth has constantly driven them back, with almost the total sacrifice of the lands which they have been compelled to abandon” (Library of Congress, n.d, para 2). The gradual loss of Native land was and remains a major point of contention between Indigenous tribes and the US government, resulting in hundreds of years of conflict, hostility, and court battles. Before colonization, Native Americans lived a nomadic lifestyle, following food and water sources across all 2.3 billion acres of what is today the continental United States. However, the desire for land acquisition among colonizers pushed Native Americans off of their land- slowly at first, but then quickly and violently. It has been said that “When lands were found to be valuable to the government and Whites, more often than not, ways were found to take them and resettle natives elsewhere” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn, 1998, p. 59). Today, the geographic environment in which Native populations live are dramatically different. Totalling only about 55 million acres, federally recognized Native American tribes reside inside of the small islands, reservations, scattered throughout the American west (Russel, G, 1993, p. 30). Like the loss of people, the loss of land held significance for many reasons. For one, Native Americans place a very high value on land- a value that is not monetary and cannot be bought. The loss of land was a loss of sanctity-a loss of kin and of identity (Salmon, 2000). The Native connection to land has been described, “For American Indians, land, plants, and animals are considered sacred

relatives, far beyond a concept of property. Their loss became a source of grief” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn, 1998, p. 58). Losing land was also directly related to political weakening and disarming of Native American tribes. With every treaty signed came more land lost- and with that came more opportunity for oppression and discrimination at the hands of the government.

### Indian Removal Act

As the demand for land continued to increase throughout the nineteenth century, so did the need to clear Native Americans in order to make way for westward expansion (Office of the Historian, n.d) In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act; a policy which evicted all Native Americans residing East of the Mississippi river to lands west of the river. (Walters, 2022). The policy incentivized relocation by promising financial and material assistance to move, as well as guaranteeing that Native Americans would be able to live on their new property “...under the protection of the United States Government forever” (Office of the Historian, n.d, para 6). Tribes were forced, despite some resistance, to relocate to land West of the river, which proved to be devastating for the health of Native American tribes- both physically and politically. The Cherokee nation alone lost 3-4,000 lives to the harsh conditions on their 1,000-mile journey from their homeland in Georgia to their new land, an event known as the “Trail of Tears” (Office of the Historian, n.d), and all in all, Native American tribes lost more than twenty-million acres of land as a direct result of the Indian Removal Act (Office of the Historian, n.d). However, the Indian Removal Act was only the beginning of the devastating loss of traditional Native American homeland sponsored by the United States Government.

## Indian Appropriations Act

As expansion moved even further westward, the need for land ever grew. Despite the treaties signed only a few decades prior guaranteeing Native Americans the land West of the Mississippi, the United States Government again introduced legislation to further reduce the Native American footprint. In 1851, Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act, a policy under which the reservation system was born (Elliot, 2015). The Indian Appropriations Act essentially forced Native Americans to relocate once again, this time to even smaller plots of land called reservations (Elliot, 2015). Individuals were “under mandate for internment and prohibited from leaving reservations, even for traditional food gathering, hunting, or fishing activities” (Native Americans In Philanthropy, n.d, para 1). In 1868, President Ulysses S. Grant introduced legislation which aimed to move all tribes onto designated plots of land and restrict tribal members to those areas, requiring that they get permission in order to leave- virtually imprisoning them there. (Indian reservation, n.d. as cited in Walters, Karina, 2022). Reservation land was largely composed of desolate farmland, making it very difficult for a population who had spent centuries as successful migratory hunters and gatherers to make the transition to farming, making flourishing difficult and starvation common (History.com Editors, 2017). Additionally, people were forced into close quarters. This combined with the lack of immunity to infection discussed prior resulted in fast spread of disease among Native Americans (History.com Editors, 2017). Today, many of the 326 Native American Reservations in the United States are just as isolated as they were when

they were first established- void of major industry and incongruent with social and economic growth.

## Black Hills

The Black Hills, located in the Western South Dakota, Southeast Montana, and Northeast Wyoming, are of particular importance to the Great Sioux Nation, the tribe that has revered them as their sacred homeland for centuries. (Epstein, 2012). The Black Hills, or “Paha Sapa” in Lakota, translates to “the heart of everything that is” (Epstein, 2012, para 1). The name refers to the appearance of the expansive pine trees, which appear black from a distance, but is also used to describe a box made from buffalo hide that was used to carry important spiritual tools and food. With this shared meaning, the Black Hills were sacred for more than just their natural beauty; they were, as Leonard Little finger (2014), a Sioux man describes, “a container for our spiritual needs as well as our needs of food and water, whatever it is that allows survival” (para 4). The Fort Laramie Treaty, signed by leaders of the US Government and the Great Sioux Nation in 1868, recognized the Black Hills as part of the Great Sioux Reservation, designating it exclusively for use by the Sioux (National Archives, 2016). However, only 6 years after the treaty was signed, gold was discovered in the region resulting in a massive influx of miners into Sioux land. Therefore, conflict between the Sioux and white miners ensued, forcing the government to act. Instead of honoring their treaty, the United States government ordered the Sioux to leave the Black Hills to make way for mining expeditions, relocating them to reservation land that was drastically different from their sacred Black Hills. (National Archives, 2016). Ever since they were lost, the Black Hills have been a major point of contention between Native American tribal leaders and the

United States Government. In 1980, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Sioux Nation, awarding them over \$100 million in reparations from the government's illegal appropriation of the Black Hills (Cutlip, 2018). The Sioux nation never accepted the money, which has continued to gain interest and is now said to be worth over 1 billion dollars. The refusal of the money signifies the importance of the land to the Sioux people (Cutlip, 2018). "The Black Hills is a sacred grandmother to us, filled with sacred power sites. How can one sell a sacred grandmother?" (Little Finger, 2014, para 9). A Sioux man describes his fears for the future regarding the unclaimed reparations, explaining,

One of my fears is that there is a day coming that the Bureau of Indian Affairs will sit down at a table with the offer and our people will accept the money. At that point, thousands and thousands of years of spiritual significance of the Black Hills will be left to the wayside because the new culture of the new people that have come onto the reservation will see the same meaning in the value of the money (Little Finger, 2014, para 10).

The loss of all land, but this land especially was incredibly impactful for the Lakota people. This is only one example of sacred land being seized and harvested for profit, however almost every major tribe across the United States share similar stories of homelands.

## Culture

As discussed, the loss of people and of land experienced by the Native American population was in and of itself a loss of culture and cultural identity. However, there are additional events throughout history through which we can observe a deliberate and

destructive erasure of Indigenous culture by the dominant culture to forcibly assimilate Native Americans into a western way of life and eliminate all traces of Native American culture in the United States.

### Boarding Schools

Native American boarding schools forced the removal of hundreds of thousands of youths from their homes and families in order to educate them under the policies and guidelines of the federal government. Boarding schools were designed by officials to “...Kill the Indian, Save the Man” (Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2020, introduction, para 4), by indoctrinating Native children into western culture. Upon arrival to boarding schools, children were made to trade in their traditional names for white names and were unable to participate in any religious or sacred behaviors, being forced to attend Christian mass and study the bible. Teachers and school officials mandated that children abandon their traditional dress, hair, and language, and cut off all means of communication between the children and their families. One survivor who attended the Flandreau Indian School in South Dakota during the 1980s explains,

On one of the first days of class, a white social studies teacher stood before our class and told us that we were lucky Columbus had found us, because otherwise we would still be living in teepees (Brooks, 2021, para 2).

Those who did not agree to abandon their way of life or comply with the rules were treated horribly- survivors told stories of physical and sexual abuse, and slave labor among other atrocities. One survivor explains the ways in which children were coerced into practicing Christianity saying, “If you went to communion you got to eat, if not, you

did not eat.” (Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2020, stories of boarding school trauma, para 10). Another survivor claims that Christian nuns forced the children to kneel on broomsticks, or suck on lye soap for not speaking English. (Gunderson, 2019). While being interviewed for an article by Dan Gunderson (2019) for MPR news, author Denise Lajimodiere explains that almost every survivor she interviewed for her book about Indian boarding schools “experienced sexual abuse, or they witnessed it” (para 15). Disease was common in boarding schools, the consequences of which were exacerbated by unsanitary conditions and poor treatment of children. Brooks (2021) reports the findings of Dr. Preston McBride of Cambridge, who estimates that 40,000 children died in or as a result of boarding school institutions- the great majority of which were never reported to their families or tribal leaders, who have been suffering for decades with the mystery of the disappearances. McBride also contends that tens of thousands of additional children were “...simply never again in contact with their families or their tribes after being sent off to the schools” (Brooks, 2021, para 17). The legacy of Indian boarding schools left an entire generation completely robbed of their history, their way of life, and their self-worth, destroying their identity and greatly contributing to the breakdown of Native American culture, especially as boarding school era children grew up to procreate.

### Religious Ceremonies

As Assimilation efforts increased in the West, Government officials made every effort to replace Indigenous religious traditions with Christian ones. Christian missionaries were stationed on reservations, and Catholic nuns often oversaw the

education of Native American children in boarding schools (Zotigh, 2018). In 1883, the Department of the Interior enacted the Religious Crime Code, which worked to,

...punish Indian dances and feasts by imprisonment or withholding food (treaty rations) for up to 30 days. Any medicine man convicted of encouraging others to follow traditional practices was to be confined in the agency prison for not less than 10 days or until he could provide evidence that he had abandoned his beliefs (Zotigh, 2018, para 3).

The Religious Crimes Code acted in direct opposition of the first amendment of the United States Constitution, banning all religious practices that were described by the US Secretary of the Interior as heathenish and immoral (Johansen, 2015 as cited in Walters, Karina, 2022). Native people lived under these restrictions until 1933, when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed and allowed Native people to do, as the Headsman of the Kiowa Gourd Clan, Tim Tsoodle explains, "...dance, sing, and mostly pray as our grandfathers did." (Zotigh, 2018, para 12). As a result of these oppressive policies, two to three generations were deprived of practicing sacred ceremonies, further distancing themselves, and therefore all their descendants from their ancestral and cultural roots (Nies, 1996 & "Code of Indian offenses", 1883 as cited in Walters, Karina, 2022).

## Diet

Diet is another aspect of Native American life that looks drastically different pre and post- colonization. Pre-colonization, the traditional Native diet consisted of food provided by the land. Nico Albert (2018) a Cherokee author explains pre-colonial diets in her article published by PBS's Native America,

Before the colonization of North America, our ancestors were healthy and strong. They led active lives and subsisted on a diet of corn, beans, squash, berries, greens, wild rice, fruits, nuts, seeds and game that provided complete and balanced nutrition specifically for the people in their region (para 3).

Although traditional diets were incredibly nourishing, food was important to Native culture as more than just a means of survival. The kinship between Native American people and nature made consuming food a deeply spiritual experience, a time for people to appreciate the gifts that nature provides. Albert (2018) contends,

When you hold a strawberry in your hand or pull the husk from an ear of corn, knowing the stories that accompany these foods transforms them. They become more than an ingredient to measure and cook with for a specified amount of time. That strawberry becomes more than just a berry. That ear of corn is so much more than “just an ear of corn.” It is an ancestor, it is our mother; a reminder of who we are, what we’ve been through, and why we must continue to survive. Every meal has the potential to be a small ceremony, a direct link between our ancestors before us and the future of our people (para 2).

Native Americans were extremely efficient in their uses of animal products, in addition to consuming meat for food, Native people used animal hides for shelter and clothing, bones for tools and weapons, organs for bags and cooking pots, fruits, roots, and vegetables for dyeing clothing and hair, and herbs for medicinal treatments and healing ceremonies- no part of the animal went to waste (Frank, 2020). Relocations from traditional homelands and the forced reliance on the US government for bi-monthly food rations resulted in the post-colonialization diet that is more common on reservations today (Frank, 2020).

Cheap and widely available foods and ingredients such as lard, flour, canned meat, and sugar were staples of the commodities and demanded a complete reconstruction of preparing and consuming food among Native Americans on Indian Reservations.

Compared with traditional Indigenous diets, commodity food is wildly unhealthy-full of fat, sodium, and sugar. Thousands of years of nutrient-packed diets, harvesting and preparation customs, medicinal uses and purposes of foods, and an entire culture of consumption and nourishment were lost throughout the colonization process, serving as yet another example of the destruction of Native American culture. (Frank, 2020).

### Buffalo Herds

“Kill Every Buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone” (Walters, 2022). As has been a continuous theme throughout this discussion, continued land acquisition by white settlers meant continued land shrinkage for the Native Americans. One mechanism by which the government used to control Native Americans was to deplete their natural resources, forcing them to choose between preserving their way of life and starvation. The American bison, known as “Tatanka” in Lakota, was one of the main food sources for plains Indians, and therefore became a target for the government-killing buffalo meant killing Native Americans (Walters, 2022). What the government didn’t know, was that while Native Americans relied heavily on the resources buffalo provided them, the buffalo was also central to Indigenous religious traditions, as evident in the Lakota emergence story, which claims that the buffalo will provide everything people need to survive (National Park Service, 2020). John Fire Lame Deer recounts his perspective on the Native admiration for buffalo below,

The buffalo gave us everything we needed. Without it we were nothing. Our tipis were made of his skin. His hide was our bed, our blanket, our winter coat. It was our drum, throbbing through the night, alive, holy. Out of his skin we made our water bags. His flesh strengthened us, became flesh of our flesh. Not the smallest part of it was wasted. His stomach, a red-hot stone dropped into it, became our soup kettle. His horns were our spoons, the bones our knives, our women's awls and needles. Out of his sinews we made our bowstrings and thread. His ribs were fashioned into sleds for our children, his hoofs became rattles. His mighty skull, with the pipe leaning against it, was our sacred altar. The name of the greatest of all Sioux was Tatanka Iyotake—Sitting Bull. When you killed off the buffalo you also killed the Indian—the real, natural, "wild" Indian (Buffalo Field Campaign, n.d, A way of life, para 1).

The cultural importance of the buffalo exacerbates the effects of the killings and was central in the deterioration of culture. The significance of the slaughtering of over 30 million buffalo simply cannot be overstated (Walters, 2022). The initiative was as harmful to the survival of Plains Indians as it was to their culture.

The losses of people, land, and culture discussed in chapter account for only a few examples of the countless losses experienced by the Native American people over the course of the last few centuries. This chapter highlighted the physical breakdown of Native American culture, catalyzed by colonization and the growing desire for more-land, money, and power. Based on the historical traumas discussed, it is clear how continuous violations of person, property, and sanctity quickly accumulated, resulting in modern Native American culture—a way of life that is almost unrecognizable from what it

was only a few generations ago. Moving forward, in chapter two we will discuss how these losses psychologically impacted Native Americans in the past, how they continue to work in the present, and how, without intentional change and intervention, they will likely persist to impact the Native population for the foreseeable future.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Psychological Impacts of Historical Grief

#### Historical Trauma

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart is a leading expert in the field of Historical trauma, especially that of Native American people. Much of her work revolves around the idea that the various historical traumas within the population have created a historical trauma response (HTR), which molds and defines some of the emotions and behavior experienced by the descendants of those who experienced so much loss during their lifetime. Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines Historical Trauma as a "... cumulative and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences". (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003, abstract).

Historical trauma is in many ways an invisible villain, haunting the lives of Native American men, women, and children who live in the shadow of the experiences of their ancestors.

#### Historical Trauma Response

Historical trauma manifests itself in humans as, what Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart (2003) refers to as the "Historical Trauma Response". The Historical Trauma Response is defined as "A constellation of features in reaction to massive group trauma" (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003, p.7). There are a wide variety of features that accompany the Historical Trauma Response, a few of which will be discussed below.

#### Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised Grief occurs when an individual or a population is unable to openly acknowledge or publicly mourn losses (Doka, 1989 as cited in Yellow Horse

Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p. 62). Through the various examples discussed earlier, including losses of life, land, and culture, and considering the prohibition of Indigenous religious and sacred bereavement ceremonies throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, disenfranchised grief has likely impacted Native American populations on a very large scale, making it one of the leading influences of the Historical Trauma Response.

Exacerbating this issue of the inability to mourn losses is the increased Indigenous value placed on people, places, and things which is fundamentally different from the value western culture assigns them. In most western cultures, loss of a family member typically refers to people in the immediate family or close relatives. However, in the indigenous sense, loss of a family member means this and much more. The indigenous family is much more extended-some bands consider the entire tribe to be immediate family (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d). For this reason, we can see how the loss of any tribal members, and not just immediate family members would have been very traumatic for those who survived. Western culture also tends to equate land with money and power. Contrastingly, Native culture reveres land, nature, and all of the resources it provides as members of their family. Salmon (2000) highlights the indigenous relationship between man and nature, “Indigenous people view both themselves and nature as part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origins... The kin, or relatives, include all the natural elements of an ecosystem” (abstract). Yellow Horse Brave heart & DeBruyn (1998) expand on this idea by explaining that in addition to land, Native Americans share a deep and intense connection with ancestors, animal relatives, songs, dances, and language (p. 63). Consequently, this

relationship made both the loss of traditional homelands as well as the inability to continue cultural practices an insurmountable source of disenfranchised grief for Native people.

Disenfranchised grief turns grief into shame, and results in the intensification of normative reactions to grief such as anger and sadness (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p. 63). When losses are unable to be mourned, and people are not given proper time to grieve, feelings of helplessness, inferiority, subordination, and lack of self-identity are common and can be amplified in future times of grieving. (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p. 63). Behaviorally, disenfranchised grief could influence an individual to have low self-esteem, engage in self-destructive behaviors, or suffer from depression (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, n.d. PowerPoint Slides, slide 6). Grief consumed by shame “negatively impacts relationships with self and others and one’s realization of the sacredness within oneself and one’s community” (Kaufman, 1989 as cited in Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p. 63).

#### Unsanctioned Grief

Similar to disenfranchised grief, unsanctioned grief is another important associated psychological feature of the Historical Trauma Response. Unsanctioned grief describes the ability of unresolved grief to follow a population for generations, impacting those who were not even alive when the losses or traumas occurred (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p.64). Unsanctioned grief is the ghost that haunts the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of those who suffered at the hands of white settlers during our country’s infancy and at the hands of the US government for years after. Yellow Horse Brave Heart once described this aspect of the Historical Trauma

Response as... “complicated grief, full of yearnings and guilt feelings... people think that if they are not suffering, they are not being loyal to their ancestors” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart as cited in Levin, 2009, para 5). A Lakota/Dakota woman expands on this idea by describing her own experience with unsanctioned grief,

I feel like I have been carrying a weight around that I’ve inherited. I have this theory that grief is passed on genetically because it’s there and I never knew where it came from. I feel a sense of responsibility to undo the pain of the past. I can’t separate myself from the past, the history and the trauma. It has been paralyzing to us as a group. (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998 as cited in Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003, p.7).

Many Native American children feel a sense of pain for the things that happened to their ancestors, exhibiting a very strong and influential loyalty to ancestral suffering and the deceased (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p.64). With these feelings, there is a sense that vitality in one’s own life is a sort of betrayal against ancestors who suffered so much, which can introduce suicide ideation, survivor guilt, and self-destructive behavior. (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, n.d. PowerPoint Slides, slide 6). When speaking on the issue of disenfranchised grief and its role in health disparities, Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn (1998) explain,

Many times, deaths occur frequently, leaving people numb from the last loss as they face the most recent one. These layers of present losses in addition to the major traumas of the past fuel the anguish, psychosocial numbing, and destructive coping mechanisms related to disenfranchised grief and historical trauma. (p.64-65).

This view helps us to understand the cyclical nature of trauma, and how features of the historical trauma response not only persist generation after generation but are exacerbated and further fueled by modern-day traumas unique from but as impactful as those that happened in the past.

### Internalized Oppression

Internalized Oppression occurs when an individual internalizes the stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the dominant oppressive culture about themselves and others like them. Oppression that occurs over generations can eventually become ingrained within the identity of a population who become convinced that the oppression towards one's own group is justified. Internalized oppression leads individuals to act in ways that support the attitude of their oppressor (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p.66), only furthering the negative stereotypes and narratives against themselves. Beliefs of the self and of others within the group are tarnished. Internalized oppression has been described as “the turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from the oppression of the dominant society” (David, Schroeder, & Fernandez, 2019). In the context of Native American history, we can clearly see multiple sources of internalized oppression, especially within the walls of Indian boarding schools. Young children were indoctrinated and made to believe that they were inferior, that they and their ancestors were savages, and that they must fundamentally change almost every aspect of their identities in order to survive. Internalized oppression has been said to work by “...silently fragmenting communities, creating division within groups, decreasing their power, and leading them to fight among themselves in an effort to fit in and not be at the bottom” (Hwang, 2021, para 4).

Themes of intense self-doubt, inferiority and shame, and identity confusion are common among those suffering from internalized oppression.

#### Identification with the aggressor

Identification with the aggressor is a fear and trauma coping mechanism that is closely related to internalized oppression in which a victim internalizes the hostility of an aggressive authority figure and either projects it onto themselves or others like them (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p.66). While internalized oppression results in feelings of self-doubt, shame, and inferiority, identification with the aggressor prompts more aggressive, violent, and physical behaviors. Those suffering from identification with the aggressor may react to the feelings of shame and inferiority by attacking themselves or others in their community in violent and hostile manners (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p.66).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Emotional and Physical Manifestations of Historical Trauma Response as Health and Wellness Disparities

Now that the features of the historical trauma response have been discussed, they can be related back to some of the most common health and wellness disparities observed within the modern Native American population. These issues are multifactorial, and do not, of course, have one single cause. However, the symptoms of the various HTR features can begin to answer questions about cause, and can begin to connect the dots between historical population traumas and health realities.

#### Substance use

Alcohol use has a long history among Native Americans, and it, along with other drugs, have been a vector which has brought on some of the most serious issues present within the population today. The Native American population has consistently greater rates of alcoholism, substance use, and drug related death compared with the non-Native American population. 7.1% of Native Americans have an alcohol use disorder compared with 5.4% of the total population (American Addiction Centers, 2021). In 2004, Indian Health Services reported that the rate of drug-related deaths within the Native American population were over 1.5 times greater than the rate of deaths for the total population (Community Health Statistics, 2002-2003). It has also been shown that alcohol is a factor in more than 6 out of 10 violent crimes committed by Native Americans and more than 5 out of 10 violent crimes in which a Native American is the victim of a violent crime. (American Addiction Centers, 2021). The alcohol-related discharge rate among Native Americans was found to be 78% higher than the total population, indicating a dramatic disparity in the need for and utilization of healthcare resources (Community Health

Statistics, 2002-2003). In addition to these statistics, studies have shown that there are increased rates of motor vehicle accident deaths, high numbers of liver disease (one of the leading causes of death within the population), and rates of fetal alcohol syndrome reaching 8 times the National average among some tribes (American Addiction Centers, 2021).

The high rates of substance use and related complications has been posited to be related to the need and desire to self-medicate in an attempt to reduce the symptoms of emotional pain. In our example, disenfranchised and unsanctioned grief cause a great amount of emotional pain – namely anger, sadness, and powerlessness, all of which may originally motivate one to use substances. Additionally, substance use may also be tied to both internalized oppression and identification with the aggressor, whereas the drug becomes a weapon used to hurt oneself and one’s family. Yellow Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn contend that alcoholism among Native Americans has been “a self-destructive act motivated by depression and grief... resulting from internalized aggression and internalized oppression.” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn, as cited in Poupart, 2003. p. 89).

#### Depression & Suicide

Some reservations reach suicide rates more than ten times the national average, and suicide is consistently one of the leading causes of death for young Native Americans between the age of 15 and 24 (Horwitz, 2014). Dr. Michelle Rivard-Parks, a professor at the University of North Dakota is quoted in Horwitz (2014), explaining the issue of suicide on reservations, “The aftermath of attempts to assimilate American and Alaska Natives remains ever present... and is visible in higher-than average rates of suicide”

(para 21). There are many ties to historical trauma responses at play here- for one, depression and suicide can be linked to internalized oppression and identification with the aggressor- one turns their feelings of inferiority and helplessness inward and harms themselves. Additionally, unresolved grief may cause uncontrollable feelings of shame and a lack of identity, while unsanctioned grief may leave a young person feeling partially responsible for the pain and suffering of their ancestors. These intense feelings have the potential to manifest as the depression and suicide we observe throughout Native communities.

## Violence

Reservations are home to rampant violent crime rates, reported to be on average, 2.5 times the national crime rate and can be up to 20 times the national crime rate on some reservations (National Congress of American Indians, n.d). The Association of American Indian Affairs reports that American Indians and Alaska Natives are 2.5 times more likely to experience violent crimes and at least 2 times more likely to experience rape or sexual assault crimes compared to all other races (Association of American Indian Affairs, n.d). Unfortunately, Native American women and children are especially at risk for violence. The association of American Indian affairs report that more than four out of five American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence in their lifetime, and homicide is the third and fifth leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women between the ages of 10 and 24 and 25 and 34 respectively. Additionally, 40% of sex trafficking victims identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. (Association of American Indian Affairs, n.d). The National Alliance to End Sexual Violence reports that at least 34% of Native American women will be raped

during their lifetimes, compared with 18% of white women. Native American children are also very likely to be victimized. In an article written by The Washington Post, tribal judge Theresa Pouley claims “The circumstances are absolutely dire for Indian children” (Horwitz, 2014, para 6). She goes on to say

They’re twice as likely as any other race to die before the age of 24. They have a 2.3 percent higher rate of exposure to trauma. They have two times the rate of abuse and neglect. Their experience with post-traumatic stress disorder rivals the rates of returning veterans from Afghanistan (Pouley as cited in Horwitz, 2014, para 7).

The same article expands on the issue of child abuse and neglect on reservations, suggesting that increased rates of child abuse, maltreatment, and neglect may be in part due to the boarding school generation- those who were taken from their families were not given secure, stable, and loving homes. Sarah Kastelic, deputy director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association said of this issue,

A system of child protection, sustained by tribal child-rearing practices and beliefs, flourished among Native Americans, and everyone in a community was responsible for the safeguarding of young people... Child maltreatment was rarely a problem because of these traditional beliefs and a natural safety net. But these child-rearing practices were often lost as the federal government sought to assimilate native people and placed children, often against their parent’s wishes- in ‘boarding schools’ that were designed to immerse Indian children in Euro-American culture... They are the parents and grandparents of today's teenagers. (Kastelic as cited in Horwitz, 2014, para 20).

They were not taught what it means to have and to be a good parent, and therefore their subsequent lineage suffers consequently (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p.59). One child of a boarding school survivor explains how learning about her father's childhood experiences in Boarding Schools helped to explain the "family dysfunction" she grew up with but did not understand as a child. She suggests that her fathers "temper, verbal abuse, and beatings" against his own children were probably symptoms of the abuse he lived through as a boarding school resident (Gunderson, 2019, para 11).

Disenfranchised and unsanctioned grief can turn feelings of grief into intense feelings of anger, which is often matched with violence against loved ones or those around us. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, claims "...the high rates of depression, suicide, homicide, domestic violence, and child abuse among American Indians can be attributed to these processes of internalized oppression and identification with the aggressor induced by historical forces" (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998, p.66). Other authors have expanded on the role of internalized oppression and identification of the aggressor with violence towards the self and others in the community, claiming "The root of the anger is at the oppressor, but any attempts at catharting anger to its root result in swift retaliation by the oppressor... it is safer to cathart anger on a family member" (Duran and Duran, as cited in Poupart, 2003, p. 90). From this perspective, it is clear how historical acts of oppression and the dismantling of Native American power and influence over the colonization period could have contributed to the increases in intercommunity violence that one sees today. Anger that is unable to be directed towards the perpetrator becomes anger with no outlet, and is eventually directed towards those who are accessible and even less powerful than the

individual experiencing the rage. In many Native American households and communities, the victims are the least powerful, the least threatening, and the least able to fight back.

#### Education, Employment, and Poverty

Disparities in educational attainment, poverty levels, and employment have multifactorial causes, ranging from lack of opportunity and availability to a sense of intellectual inferiority and a lack of self-confidence. According to the Indian Health Services publication, *Trends in Indian Health*, 70.9 % of Native Americans age 25 and older are high school graduates or higher, compared with 80.4% of all-races in the US. (Population Statistics, 2002-2003). Similarly, only 11.5% of Native Americans have successfully completed a bachelor's degree, compared with 24.4% of the all-races population. (Population Statistics, 2002-2003). The same source reports that there are more than two times as many Native Americans living below the poverty line compared with white people living below the poverty line (25.7% vs. 12.4%). Finally, the unemployment rates for Native Americans are more than two times higher for both males and females over the age of 16 compared with rates for all-races in the US. (Population Statistics, 2002-2003).

There are so many contributing factors that reduce the economic, educational, and occupational successes of some Native American individuals, especially children and young adults. For one, the co-dependency of education, employment, and wealth can make it very difficult to build wealth and escape poverty without employment, which is sometimes difficult to obtain without an education. On the other hand, as discussed, many Indian reservations are largely void of industry and opportunity for more highly educated individuals, making higher education and reliable employment much more difficult to

obtain and maintain. Those who do get educated typically don't come back- a type of brain drain that impacts many rural communities but is especially significant on reservations (Ross, 2014). There is little diversity in employment opportunities, and factors such as lack of transportation, child care, health limitations, and disabilities can make it very difficult to maintain employment. An article written in Forbes magazine points to a lack of individual land ownership on reservations as another source of poverty. Author John Koppisch (2011) explains this issue,

The vast majority of land on reservations is held communally. That means residents can't get clear title to the land where their home sits, one reason for the abundance of mobile homes on reservations. This makes it hard for Native Americans to establish credit and borrow money to improve their homes because they can't use the land as collateral--and investing in something you don't own makes little sense, anyway (para 3).

These factors and more contribute to cyclical poverty on Native American reservations, making it difficult to escape poverty and improve the way of life on reservations.

We have discussed the deep feelings of hopelessness as a result of the Historical Trauma Response and its impacts on the view of self in some Native American people. Tony West, Associate Attorney General of Arizona once said, "There are too many young people in Indian country who don't see a future for themselves, who have lost all hope" (West as cited in Horwitz, 2014, para 23). In addition to the devaluing of self, the feelings of inadequacies and hopelessness brought on by the Historical Trauma Response, Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn (1998) suggest that a decline in achievement observed among Lakota children may be explained by observations that cognitive

performance deteriorates over time in traumatized individuals, relating the issue of lower graduation and higher education rates, as well as higher rates of unemployment and poverty back to the incidence and persistence of trauma within the Native American population (p. 64).

## Conclusion

This project has discussed the various historical traumas that resulted in dramatic losses in population, land, and culture of Native American people, how those traumas have contributed to the development of the historical trauma response, and the ways in which the features of the historical trauma response manifest themselves in the health and wellness disparities we observe on some Indian reservations and among the broader Native American populations throughout the country. It is of the utmost importance to understand the mechanisms in which history- that of our parents, grandparents, and even more distant ancestors follow us through time, especially when the history is as unique and influential as that of the Indigenous population.

There is ample evidence to support a connection between historical trauma and health disparities. Now that contributing factors have been identified, we as society should make every effort to adapt to the influences of history by being mindful of how it may be impacting those around us. Clinicians and providers already have some framework for treating those suffering from the historical trauma response. Yellow Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) detail some of the strategies of their healing model explaining,

We present a model for facilitating the resolution of historical unresolved grief through the integration of both clinical and traditional American Indian interventions...American Indian tribes will need to facilitate communal grief rituals, incorporating elders and teaching storytelling skills about tribal history to youth which further serve to heighten historical awareness, germane to our model of healing. (p.66).

The authors suggest that treatment should involve “heightened awareness of historical trauma” (p.67), and should actually stimulate the experience of associated grief via depiction of historical traumas (p.67). Although these strategies and others like them have been used and developed to treat some of the features of the Historical Trauma Response, it is clear that more work can be done to help those that are still struggling.

It is very important to develop an understanding and acknowledgement of the historical traumas that are still influencing and shaping modern society. Acknowledging hardships and feelings can only lead to improved relationships, and acknowledging traumas may even lead to improved health outcomes and disparities.

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