



Trauma Trails

Kurunna Mwarre “Make My Spirit Inside Me Good”

A Summary of Trauma Trails, Recreating Songlines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia

By Author Judy Atkinson – An Aboriginal woman

Purpose of her work:

1. To gain a contextual understanding of violence and the experience of trauma;
2. The cultural and individual processes of recovery (or healing) from violence-related trauma.

Rationale:

Knowing and naming the statistics does not change painful situations. In fact much research work has been centred on putting statistics together while **Aboriginal pain** has continues often defined as an “alcohol problem”, a “suicide problem” ...

A culturally safe project approach

Ethical concerns - Consider:

- Obligations of relating
- Power over the gaining and use of information
- A shared dialogue is the core component in the methodological approach
- Listening to one another
- A narrative approach (consistent with oral storytelling)
- Consciousness raising-the value given to community processes in consciousness raising
- Participatory action – the valuable contribution people make on their activities of relating, defining and narrating together, their own life-being.
- Phenomenology- understanding relationships between the inner world of an individual and the outer world of relationships

The assumptions of project Judy worked with:

1. Success of project depends on Aboriginal people approval
2. Principles of reciprocity adopted
3. People have to feel safe and be safe

QUESTIONS:

What is the experience of violence?

- How does violence relate to child development, family and community fragmentation, alcohol and drug misuse, race and gender injustice ?
- How do the experiences of violence contribute to experiences and behaviours that influence situations of inter and transgenerational trauma?
- What personal and social experiences assist change in such behaviours?
- What is healing and how do people heal?
- What cultural tools promote change or healing and how can indigenous values and practices be supported to promote individual and family and community well-being?

What is violence?

- Violence is an **activity** : brutality, cruelty, sadism, bloodshed, atrocity, carnage.
- Violence is also defined by **feeling words**: resentment, hostility, hate, enmity, lack of empathy.
- Violence is also an **experience**-exercise of control over another through destructive force or physical/psychological force.

The word **experience** is used to acknowledge that a person who is violated in an act of violence experiences violence and that a person who sees or hears violence experiences violence.

A vital consideration, if we as Aboriginal peoples are to be able to deal with the violence in our families and communities today, is to begin the process of understanding the social, cultural and spiritual construction of violence as trauma as violence and consider appropriate recovery from within Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and acting in the world.

WHY IS THERE VIOLENCE?

History of colonization:

1. **Physical Violence**: invasion, disease, sexual exploitation, death and destruction
2. **Structural Violence**: enforced dependency, legislation, reserves and removals
3. **Psycho-social dominance**: cultural and spiritual genocide-stolen generation.

The land:

The land that was called terra nullius by British colonisers in 1788 was in fact a living, breathing landscape inhabited by 300,00 and 1 million people with over 500 languages.

To Aboriginal people this country was their homeland. They lived in small extended family units and language groups woven together by complex kinship systems. They were hunter-gatherers who lived semi-nomadic lives. Order was maintained in relationships with the natural world by rituals and ceremonies conducted to ensure increase and the healing of country which were essential for survival. If ceremonial obligations were met the land would nurture them. Ceremonial activity also managed conflict. If people met their social obligations in relationship to others they in turn would be nurtured by processes of reciprocity. In 1788 colonisation brought disorder and disharmony and a new law.

Aboriginal world views Land is a story place...not just a physical place but a moral sphere, the seat of life and emotions and a place of the heart...the land grew the people and the people grew the

country...the Dreamtime...a central concept is the notion of spiritual continuity of the present-and the future- within the ancestral past.

Relationships and Land

Land is central to identity, provides a guide for human interaction and a sense of well-being.

Stanner: "No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and homeland. Our word "home", warm and suggestive thought it might be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean "camp", "hearth", "country", " everlasting home", "totem place", "life source", " spirit centre" and much else all in one. Our word land is too spare and meagre".

...birth and conception sites

...Recuperative aspects and has an important role to play in healing

....dreaming

Ceremony

Ceremony and ritual as articulation of relationship

Ceremony was and is central to Aboriginal life.

Ceremony is "looking after country".

Ceremonies are a time when feelings can be articulated in creative action.

Ceremony is a time of communicating with ancestral beings, the creation powers and other people.

Ritual

Ritual confirms and reaffirms responsibility to kin and is a potent tool for affirming, and articulating knowledge and power over life and death.

All ritual life:

1. dispel feelings of despair and hopelessness as they provide a testament to people of the power they hold over life and death
2. allow people to work thru their feelings of sorrow and anger in using interconnecting webs of relationships between groups and kin.

The wilful denigration and destruction of Aboriginal ceremonial responsibilities and processes by the colonisers has had profound transgenerational effects on the people of this land.

Relationships between people

- Trauma disrupts and restructures relationships between people
- Gender and age relationships have been fractured and dismantled by colonisation

In the old time:

- Men's power was looking out for the mob and for the sacred and women for familial circles and the sacred
- Childrearing defined gender specific responsibilities
- Any adult who allowed a child to be severely hurt would be punished for their negligence
- The authority of elders was paramount

- Relationships at the individual level, between groups were renegotiated, redefined and healed on an ongoing basis in ceremonial pursuits and day-to day activities

Aggression

What might be viewed as highly emotive and aggressive behaviour from a non-Aboriginal perspective is often simply an expression of genuine concern, distress and real feeling.

- What has often been described as savagery was assertive or ritualised violence and where there was informed consent.
- Savagery and violence came with the colonisers who acted without consent –massacres-genocide-forced removal children, institutional detainments-lands stolen and desecrated-epidemics...

An example:

Grassy Narrows-in Canada: the government relocated the community in 1963 after a paper company dumped deadly chemicals into the rivers which had represented the life support and the spiritual identity of people. Within a short space of time sexual assault, child abuse, extreme alcohol abuse, petrol sniffing and violence occurred. Death thru violence became epidemic. Older children beat and raped younger children.

Within the context of colonisation 2 more things happened.

1.The numbness of the human spirit-there was a listlessness, an indifference, a total passivity and he said he had never seen such hopelessness anywhere in the Third World.

2.With the destruction of the place with its central meaning to body/mind/spirit/place/soul/social order was destroyed and chaos became the norm. Homicide and suicide prevailed.....**so psychological, cultural and emotional violence rank equally with and in many cases outrank physical violence.**

WHAT DOES VIOLENCE DO TO SOCIETIES?

Trauma

DSM-1V- the psychiatric manual defines post-traumatic stress:

The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to the physical integrity to self or others- and the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness or horror.

Aboriginal society has experienced more features of trauma which make it more traumatic:

- **chronic, ongoing stress of particular situations** or where the stressors are cumulative over time
- **the stressors are of human origin and not natural disasters**
- **collective trauma** made more complex as the bureaucratic response dismantles the natural support and caring people have for each other
- **transgenerational trauma-cultural, genocide, massacres**
- **The violation of the lands, place or space or home**
- Powerlessness which **can promote violence.**

Responses

- Anger and violence
- Alcohol and drugs get used

- Depression and suicide
- Rage or deep anger.
- Anger usually masks a hurt. At the time of violence the primary feelings are fear or terror.
- If not anger apathy or passivity
- Mood swings
- Sleeplessness
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Death

Drinking Parties

The feelings of rage and aggression normally released in face-to-face encounters find expression during drinking parties which are the context for beating, rape, or other acts of violence that may lead to death. The drinking parties become part of the vicious circle in which the mourners often become those who are mourned.

Victimisation

Human acts of violence create feelings of victimisation.

Victimisation is different to bereavement and has deeper destructive impacts. The bereaved feels loss. The victim feels like a loser. The bereaved feels sad. The victim feels humiliated, exploited and diminished.

The ATSI Women' s Task Force report on Violence:

Violence and death is such a common occurrence in Aboriginal communities every family directly or indirectly suffers the consequences of murder or serious assault.

After victimisation family support is very important for recovery.

This emphasises need to focus on rebuilding Aboriginal families for a whole-of –community, whole-of-government approach to violence and trauma

To rebuild you need seriousness, determination and discipline.

The Violent Person

- Hurt and abused as a child
- Not talking about the hurt
- Having no single human being in whom they can confide their feelings
- Having a lack of education or knowledge which do not allow the person to think the abuse like a witness might
- Becomes the aggressor or to feel powerful
- Becomes violent to release pent up feelings
- Acts rather than thinks
- Is in a lot of pain
- Can be frightened and has been very frightened

- Can be motivated by revenge and grievance
- May not be able to understand and forgive
- Can repeat the abuse on children or lash out at others

HEALING

We Al-Li : a program of healing

Questions asked:

- What do you remember most about your childhood?
- What was it like for you growing up as a young man or woman?
- Have you ever been hurt?
- Have you ever hurt yourself?
- Have you ever experienced any form of violence as an adult?
- Have you ever behaved violently toward another person?
- Were the police involved?
- Have you used substances and were substances involved?
- What was it like being in a family like for you?
- Can you talk about feelings?
- Can you talk about healing-what does it mean?
- Need a safe place to tell their stories

Listening

Listening (*dadirri*) to one another---has been referred to as an Aboriginal gift and a unique gift and special quality of the Aboriginal people-deep listening and quiet awareness

The principles and function of *listening* are:

- A knowledge and consideration of community and diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to community
- Ways of acting and relating to within the community
- A non-intrusive observation
- A deep listening
- A reflective non-judgmental consideration of what is being seen or heard
- And having learnt from listening a purposeful plan to act
- It is informed by the concept of community
- The principles of reciprocity-I will listen to you share with you as you listen and share with me
- Listening invites responsibility to get to the story
- The result is insight and recognition of the responsibility to act with truth in relationship to what has been seen, heard and told.
- *Dadirri* listens and knows, witnesses, feels, empathises in the pain under the anger and if the anger is accompanied by action, seeks to understand the thoughts and feelings behind the action....seeks to find the source of the pain..
- *Dadirri* is at its deepest level the search for meaning and understanding...Im thinking and feeling here.

- As the listening/learning function is adhered there is a change process as people begin to access their inner stories and outer lives-parts which they may be fearful of knowing or acknowledging..*Dadirri* gives value to the human story no matter how painful or shameful the story is
- The stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside, In the ceremonies we celebrate the awareness of our lives as sacred

Five important stages to heal- We Al-Li : a program of healing

- People must be allowed to find and explore their stories –individually and collectively-to become self aware.
- Healing occurred as participants felt and expressed the depth of their feelings in the safety of themselves and others.
- Emotional release was a critical factor in healing themselves and being able to tell new stories.
- Helping participants make sense of their stories in relation to the collective, communal story
- The acknowledgement of multiple layers of loss and grief leads to process of transformation

I will tell you something about stories'

They aren't just entertainment.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have,

All we have to fight off illness and death.

You don't have anything if you don't have your stories.

Their evil is mighty,

But it can't stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy our stories.

Let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that

They would be happy,

Because we would be defenceless then.

By Leslie Marmon Silko, "Ceremony".

This resource and further information about Creating A Safe Supportive Environment is available to download at www.casse.org.au/resources.

CASSE Australia Inc
PO Box 156
Kew VIC 3101

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T 0450 540 366
www.casse.org.au