

Historical Trauma and Present Impact

Events Contributing to the Destruction of Many Tribal Cultures

- **Retaliation for forming alliances** – There are many tragic events during the early expansion of this country. This period produced increased levels of hostilities toward Indian nations. Warfare, disease, and removal resulted in the complete destruction of many tribal cultures.
- **Removal from the traditional homelands (Trail of Tears)** – The ideal of “progress” was invoked to rationalize the forced migrations as inevitable and to obscure the material greed of American expansionism. This period has been described as one of the blackest chapters in American history: “Tens of thousands of helpless Indians, many of whom had white blood, were wholly or partly civilized, and owned homes, livestock, and farms, suffered incredible hardships.... All their efforts to halt or reverse the government’s policy failed, and in the end almost all the members of each of the tribes were removed to different areas in the present State of Oklahoma. Some of them went reluctantly but without defiance; others went in chains. Most of them streamed westward under the watchful eyes of troops who made sure that they kept moving (Josephy, 1968, p.323).” There were many “Trails of Tears” involving tribes from the eastern part of the U.S. to the coast of California.
- **Introduction of new diseases** – The recent immigrants introduced new diseases and practiced unfamiliar medical treatment. Diseases foreign to Native people wiped out over half of the American Indian population and the impact of these diseases is still being felt in Indian Country. Disease killed many leaders and elders, thus cutting off tribal leadership, as well as the sources for knowledge and tradition. Furthermore, the power of the medicine people was undermined, because there were no cures for alien diseases about which they had no knowledge. Memories remain among Native Americans about what non-Indians did through deliberately providing them with infected blankets as “gifts” – an early form of germ warfare (Vogel, 1972).
- **Justification of behavior in support of westward expansion and forced relocation** – Forced relocation was another factor which caused many deaths as well as numerous other problems, many of which were mental health related. Dealing with the reality of being conquered, the shame, the forced dependency upon the U.S. government, and the stripping of traditional roles from men, women, and children has impacted tribes for centuries. Other impacts of forced relocation include dealing with broken treaties, being restricted to reservations (historically an Indian had to have a permit to leave the reservation), poverty conditions, and the consequences of not relocating, which often meant destruction and death (O’Sullivan & Handal, 1988; Vogel, 1972).



- **Emerging governmental regulations of Indian tribes and families** – As the increments of white settlements moved westward, there was an increase in the restrictions on tribal migrations, hunting, fishing, and gathering activities. There began tolerance and acceptance toward the killing or murdering of tribal members for bounties. The stage was set to justify discarding or destroying the lifestyle of Native people if it conflicted with westward expansion.
- **Disregard for traditional leaders and tribal consensus in decisions** – The newly established democracy retaliated against tribal groups for forming alliances; it negotiated the removal of tribes to areas away from the traditional homelands. The new government disregarded the process of listening to the traditional tribal leadership with the method of consensus in decision making. There began the encouragement and ready accessibility of alcohol to Native people. Alcohol availability increased as the land base for tribal people decreased. The Washington based government was highly influenced by increasing numbers of settlements being established within tribal boundaries and the increased potential for conflict.
- **Confinement to limited locations with limited resources** – It was not uncommon for Native Americans to need a pass or a permit to leave the reservation. In 1876, Standing Bear, a Ponca Indian Chief sued the U.S. government when he was arrested and detained for leaving the reservation. Standing Bear petitioned the court by a writ of Habeas Corpus. The Judge had to rule on whether an Indian had the rights of freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. The government tried to prove that an Indian was neither a person nor a citizen so couldn't bring suit against the government. On April 30, 1879 the Judge stated that an Indian is a person within the law and that Indians could not be detained illegally.
- **Removal of children from their homes to boarding schools** – Forced education through boarding schools caused considerable damage to the structure and function of tribal societies as well as to the mental health of Natives. Historically, Native American children were taken from their tribal homes to attend boarding schools, sometimes hundreds of miles away from their homes and families. They were forbidden to speak their tribal language, given “christian” names, they were usually forced to wear a uniform, their hair was shorn, and they were taught the ways of the non-Indian society. The early charters for Native American education were the same: to remove the child from the influence of his or her “savage” parents.
- **The losses of culture, language, children, land and spiritual beliefs caused Native people grief and depression** – The horrible effects of boarding schools on tribes extend to the undermining of tribal ways of parenting, traditional child-rearing, use of language (many a story about a child finally returning home and being unable to speak to his or her parents), the negative messages about Natives, and the forced assimilation of non-Indian ways have had devastating consequences.



Contributing Factors to Child Victimization in Indian Country

Different Native communities experienced different degrees of factors contributing to child victimization which include:

- stress
- unemployment
- limited resources (personal, family, community)
- harsh punishment
- alcohol/drug abuse
- no role models
- anger
- shame/grief/pain
- no sanctions against abuse
- limited tribal/native jurisdiction for non-tribal/native members
- children not valued
- helplessness/hopelessness
- lack of teachings and limited reward for teachings
- lack of sufficient housing
- isolation
- denial and/or acceptance

Historically Native families used the extended network of family members to rear children. The survival of the family depended on the interdependent relationships among its members.

Methods the U.S. government employed to provide for Indian children:

- **Education** - the purpose of boarding schools and missions was to “provide the U.S. government with a method to educate and civilize Indian children away from the influences of their savage lifestyle and unchristian ways.” This was the first method.
- **Child Safety and Protection** - purpose of protecting children was to offer children an “opportunity out of poverty.” Eventually as child protection became a social issue, Indian children became a target.



What Children Experienced in Boarding School

- **Children were chained, whipped and beaten** - The outcome of children being removed from their tribes was the immediate elimination of culture and teachings to the next generation. Children fought back the best they could but they were punished for running away; they were whipped for speaking their own language; they were denied food and substance as punishment for minor infractions; or they ended up in “isolation” if they dared to be “defiant” and show disrespect toward school authorities. It is not surprising that they developed defenses to guard against becoming emotionally attached and increased those behaviors that were destructive.
- **Denied medical care** - Children became exposed to diseases and unsanitary conditions that increased the likelihood of illness and death.
- **Denied contact with their family** - Families knew only that children went away from them and many of them never returned. Children were taken for several years at a time. Those taken at young and vulnerable ages forgot who they were and how to live in the villages as Native adults.
- **Abandonment, abuse and victimization** - Children felt abandoned because they were not allowed to see their families for years at a time. The additional cruelty was that they were subject to physical and sexual abuse by school personnel who had the power to control their lives. Most boarding schools created the climate for emotional, physical and sexual abuse of Indian children resulting in generations of children learning about victimization. They were five or six years old when they arrived and were almost twenty when they left. They learned early that it was not desirable to be Indian or to be children.
- **Poor preparation for adulthood** - Children were used as servants to boarding school personnel. They learned only how to obey for fear of punishment, and did not learn how to become a contributing member of tribal society.
- **Lack of adequate food, clothing and shelter** - Upon entering boarding school, children were made to cut their hair, wear clothing that they were not familiar with, live in structures that were foreign to them and fed food that was not adequate nor could they physically tolerate what they were given. Often, food was withheld as punishment for minor infractions.
- **High death rate (burials without notification to parents)** - School grounds contained cemeteries with unmarked graves of children whom died without parents ever being told of their child’s condition or death.
- **Punished for speaking their language** - Children would speak their tribal language to each other to make them feel less homesick and to converse about their life in the boarding school. Boarding school personnel did not want them speaking to each other and would punish them harshly for not speaking English.



- **No parental role models** - Several generations of children were raised in boarding schools and never had the opportunity to participate in a family environment. They were not taught their roles within the family and within their society. This has been called the boarding school legacy.

Indian people were conditioned not to fight back, each time they fought back something was taken away. Such things as:

- **Children** – children were moved to boarding schools without parents having any idea of where they were going or when they would be back.
- **Food** – with the movement of tribes out of traditional lands, they no longer knew the lands and were denied the opportunity to hunt and fish. The government provided rations of food. The quality and quantity of the rations were inadequate for the villages and communities.
- **Shelter** – their homes were destroyed and tribes were forced to move into prison like camps. They no longer had the natural shelter of the trees, rivers and open lands.
- **Land** – forced removal was devastating to Indian people. They lost sacred grounds that had been theirs from the beginning of time.
- **Warmth** – they no longer had the warmth of fires or each other. Many tribes were separated when forced to move, as some tribal members chose not to go, hiding wherever they could find.
- **Religion/Spirituality** – tribes were forbidden to practice their religions as they had always done. Many of their religious practices were outlawed and were only made legal with the Religious Freedom Act in 1978.
- **Language** – much of the language was lost during the boarding school era which lasted until the early 1970's. Children were punished harshly when caught speaking tribal languages. Head Start, introduced approximately 25 years ago, has been one program instrumental in encouraging Native languages. However, the parents of Head Start children are increasing unlikely to have access to family who taught them in their own tongue.
- **Homes** – not only homes but traditional and sacred lands were lost when tribes were forced to move to Indian Territory. Building material was inaccessible.
- **Elders** – many elders died during the forced removal period. They were not strong enough to make the move to the new lands.



- **Teachings** – much of the traditional teachings were lost due to many of the children being forced into boarding schools and not able to learn traditional tribal practices.

Types of personalities attracted to Indian reservations

Missionaries/religious individuals

- sincere desire
- seeking to help
- no understanding of Indian lifestyle or religion/spirituality
- no understanding of the impact of the removal of their children
- possessed the mentality of the era
- zealous in effort to “christianize” Indians
- rigid and punitive
- escaping from consequences of illegal behavior

Social “rejects and misfits”

- alienated from dominant American culture
- high level of idiosyncratic traits and characteristics
- high level of aberrant behavior
- behavior less tolerated in dominant culture
- behavior more tolerated in isolated areas
- less likelihood of confrontation with peers
- rigid and punitive

For the most part, agents, missionaries, and school authorities were not accountable for how they disciplined or managed their areas. They did not necessarily have to account for children who died or were beaten. In all honesty, concerned citizens did raise the issues of treatment of children in schools and the treatment of tribes at different points in time. Little effort was exerted by those in authority to change the conditions surrounding the education of Native children or their treatment (Merriam Report, 1928).

Ex-Military/Authoritarian

- placement for former military leaders and soldiers
- appeal of isolated locations
- valued independence
- valued freedom to interpret law/justice
- justice was self-serving
- income generating
- rigid and punitive

It was very common for the military to assign ex-military men as agents at the Indian schools. Many such individuals were very authoritarian in nature while not wanting to be constantly accountable for their behavior. The remote sites provided the distance whereby they could govern without direct interference from authorities. Most frontier individuals valued independence and interpreted the interdependency of tribal clans and



bands as being of lesser value. As independent thinkers and doers, most were accustomed to utilizing vicious and brutal solutions when conflict arose. Others were fearful and retaliated before any physical harm could befall their own persons. Many individuals interpreted justice as meeting their own needs by taking advantage of those who were helpless or measured as unworthy opponents. The measure for justice was self-serving. Typically, these individuals became the interpreters, married into the tribes and became the go-between. They then began to control the economy.

Indian parents today can be described as:

- a higher likelihood of a history of substance abuse and usage within the family
- a higher likelihood of first pregnancy as an adolescent
- an increased likelihood of having children longer and later in life
- a long period of child bearing years
- a higher likelihood of having a high diploma or GED
- a higher likelihood of three generations living within the same household
- a collective and individual history of oppression, generational grief, depression, anxiety and shame
- if male, a suicide rate seven time higher than non-white males
- if male, most likely to have a history of incarceration or probation
- higher likelihood of living below the poverty level, living in substandard housing, and living in isolated or rural areas
- an age of less than 21
- if an elder, the likelihood of living on a reservation
- if young adult or child, the likelihood of living in an urban area
- the likelihood of dying before their non-Indian peers

Traditional Practices of Parenting

- **Children were disciplined to increase compliance with cultural expectations** – children and youth were provided lengthy explanations of the reasons for family and tribal guidelines and for preferred behaviors. Children were encouraged to see and follow the examples set by others. Positive self concept was taught by letting a child practice and succeed at a task appropriate for that age level (Primeaux, 1977).
- **Children were not punished out of anger** – children are accorded the same degree of respect as an adult. Children are considered important units of the family and are central to the family. They are considered more important than material possessions. Talking loudly and reprimanding children is considered ill mannered.
- **Punishment was determined by behavior of the child** – depending on the infraction, punishment could be swift and unforgiving. For example, a child that disrespected fire would be allowed to test the fire and may actually be burned in order to learn to respect fire. A child that cried out with loud wailing may jeopardize the tribe and alert enemies to their location. That child would be left out in the bush to cry until the child learned not to cry. Natural consequences were believed to be a



great teacher. The discipline was to teach a child that everyone depended on the group for survival.

Mental Health Issues Affecting American Indians

Risk Markers in Indian Families:

- historical context of abuse
- historical shame and grief
- historical trauma
- generational impact
- cultural oppression
- boarding school legacy
- generational use of alcohol
- alcohol related injuries and deaths
- fetal alcohol syndrome
- fetal alcohol effects
- illegal behavior
- incarceration and probation
- cultural displacement
- cultural confusion
- cultural assimilation
- cultural conformity
- identity conflict
- tribal vs. Indianness
- out of home placements
- suicide risks
- cluster suicides
- school drop out rates

Risk Markers for American Indian Adolescents

Developmental:

- learning disabilities
- psycho-social dysfunctional behavior
- FAS/FAE
- criminal behavior
- poor academic performance
- gang violence
- alcoholism
- inhalant abuse
- depression
- suicide
- poor self esteem
- alienation



- poverty
- domestic violence
- family disruption
- injuries and accidents
- out of home placement
- school drop out
- sexual and/or physical abuse victim
- neglect
- emotional abuse

Mental Health Issues of American Indian Children

Prenatal

- teenage pregnancies (30 times more likely to give birth)
- little or no prenatal care
- premature births

Chemical Exposure/Abuse

- prenatal exposure to alcohol, cocaine, inhalants, and other drugs
- prenatal exposure to tobacco

Developmental Disorders

- mental retardation
- FAS/FAE
- Otitis Media (middle ear infection) 75%
- language and speech - 1st in speech impairments; hearing disorders
- lack of immunizations
- lack of preventative care - dental
- behavioral and emotional problems (non-compliance, acting out, severely emotionally disturbed, out of home placements)

School Age Children and Cross-Over Effect

- increase in behavioral problems
- increase in out-patient treatment
- decrease in academic achievement
- runaways - go earlier, stay longer, become lost

