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Rethinking Historical Trauma: Narratives of Resilience

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Accepted for Publication in Transcultural Psychiatry

## Abstract

There is significant variation in how people experience, emplot, and intergenerationally transmit trauma experiences. Despite this variation, the literature rarely illustrates alternative manifestations or resilient responses to the construct of historical trauma. Based upon person-centered ethnographic research, this paper highlights how a four-generation American Indian family contextualizes historical trauma and, specifically, how they frame their traumatic past into an ethic that functions in the transmission of resilience strategies, family identity, and as a framework for narrative emplotment. In conclusion, the author clarifies the distinction between historical trauma—the precipitating conditions or experiences—and the historical trauma response—the pattern of diverse responses that may result from exposure to historical trauma.

**KEY WORDS:** Historical Trauma, Intergenerational Trauma, Trauma Narratives, American Indian Identity, Resilience

A lot of pain and suffering our family has going through. A lot of things that have happened to our family that were unjust, that were cruel, that were down right murderous, but we survived.

My father would tell many other stories about pain and suffering and unjust things that happened to our family. And he would always bring it back to the center and say, 'Maybe the reason for that was so you boys can make a better life for your family.' — Cliff Si John 2001

The sustained impact of colonial intrusion and related trauma on American Indian families resulted in rapid cultural change, adjustment, and loss. Discussions concerning the consequences of colonialism and the challenges facing American Indian people frequently do not illustrate the strengths expressed by individuals and communities, as powerful stories, songs, histories, and strategies for resilience are often present behind the realities of inequality, injustice, and poverty. Studying the challenges American Indian people confront is helpful and needed; however, such studies provide greater benefit when combined with descriptions emphasizing the strengths of Native people.

The impetus for this paper came as a result of a year spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork with the Si Johns, a Coeur d'Alene Indian family living in Northern Idaho. Throughout this experience, I noticed that a significant number of their family narratives involved or referenced stories of racism, murder, warfare, forced removal from traditional lands, negative residential school experiences, and other traumas. The origins of their trauma narratives were not confined solely to descriptions of colonialism; indeed, their stories ranged from present day experiences with the health care system and racism to stories from time immemorial. However, despite a multigenerational history of repeated traumatic experiences and highly vivid oral histories that effectively transport these experiences into the present,

members of this four-generation family exhibited few of the Western notions of dysphoria or psychopathology that many professionals or researchers may anticipate.

While reviewing my archive of Si John oral history and family narratives, I examined the literature describing the impact and effects of historical trauma within American Indians, First Nations people, Indigenous Australians, and families impacted by the Holocaust. Based upon these sources, I expected the Si John family to be experiencing what could be considered a textbook example of historical trauma. However, resultant “dysfunction,” a characteristic central to the literature on historical trauma, was not present. If there was no obvious wounding or dysphoric reaction to the trauma, in the Western diagnostic sense, could I describe the family as being impacted by historical trauma? Or was I observing something else?

Further complicating this incongruence was that the family’s history of trauma and their related narratives appeared to function as a vector, a significant carrier of cultural and family identity. Additionally, embedded within the trauma narratives were numerous strategies for resilience, or a non-pathological adaptive response and ability to maintain or “spring back” to a stable equilibrium after experiencing adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003, p. iii; Conner, Davidson, & Lee, 2003; Bonanno, 2004). Specifically, trauma narratives transmit strength, optimism, and coping strategies that family members internalize and use to “emplot” their own narratives, or organize “life events and experiences into a coherent and ever-evolving story” (Neimeyer & Stewart 1996, p. 360).

The exact resilience transmission or acquisition process was initially unclear. After further discussion with family members, however, I was shown how the trauma was framed and integrated into both their family foundation and individual identity, which is inextricably linked to the larger family identity of those living and past. Specifically, the way narratives are

constructed and told, in addition to their contents or meaning, communicate specific resilience strategies. This resilience process is facilitated by not only consistent reminders of who they are as Native people, but also the strong circle of oral traditions and narratives contributed by each family member to the larger family circle. This ethic of sharing narratives generates and connects a cycle of listening and learning that culminates in sharing their wisdom with others.

Unfortunately, the literature rarely discusses alternative characteristics or manifestations of historical trauma. Moreover, the assumptions of historical trauma research are often presented and accepted as if all social groups experiencing historical trauma, particularly American Indian people, would become prone to dysfunction or exhibit other signs of psychological or social distress. Diagnostic categories frequently compound this tendency by defining social suffering and political upheaval, such as violence, colonialism, and poverty, as individual psychological disorders rather than considering social factors and the larger political-economic environment.

After offering a general review of the trauma and historical trauma constructs, I present a family with a significant record of historical injustices and traumatic experiences that does not manifest a pathological response. Instead, they exhibit resilience despite a difficult past that is frequently reenacted within their current socio-cultural environment. Finally, in an effort to begin to reconceptualize historical trauma, I emphasize the importance of further distinguishing between the notion of “historical trauma” and the “historical trauma response.”

### **Context and Methods**

Although their traditional lands extend far beyond the current reservation boundaries, the Coeur d’Alene, or *Schitsu’umsh*, are an Interior Salish people living within the Palouse region and western slope of the Rocky Mountains of Northern Idaho. The Coeur d’Alene people have a

strong sense of place and a far-reaching oral history that extends back to time immemorial.

Their first contact with westward expansion first came indirectly through adoption of the horse and the spread of diseases such as smallpox. Later, the Coeur d'Alene encountered fur traders, members of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Jesuit missionaries, and finally, Euro-American settlers. Although there were only 520 tribal members in 1890 (Palmer, 1998), currently, there are over 1,900 enrolled members (Coeur d'Alene Tribe, 2006). Numerous ethnographic sources describe the historical and cultural characteristics of the Coeur d'Alene people (Frey, 2001; Palmer, 1998; Boas & Teit, 1996).

This paper is a result of a larger ethnographic project examining the transmission of identity within a Coeur d'Alene Indian family spanning four generations. The research took place between spring 2001 and summer 2002 on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation and throughout the Inland Northwest. The project followed a qualitative, person-centered, ethnographic approach (Hollan, 2000). The interview formats were primarily semi-structured and unstructured. Participant observation included numerous powwows, a Jump Dance (Winter Spirit Dance), community activities, and other unstructured time spent with the family. Elicitation of Cliff Si John's narrative, the family patriarch and my primary consultant, took place over seven formal interview sessions, each lasting from one to two hours. During these sessions, Cliff would recount family narratives, stories, songs, and history. Interviews and informal interactions occurred with other Si John family members within the home, work, or community settings. Although I focused primarily on the Si John family, interaction and participant observation also occurred with other tribal members (e.g., the traditional digging of water potatoes). The University of Idaho ethics review board granted ethics approval for this project. The Coeur d'Alene Tribal Council granted permission to conduct research on Tribal

lands, and the Si John family reviewed the narratives, approved the project results, and received copies of all audio-recorded interviews.

A categorical and holistic content-based approach was used to code and analyze the narratives. Specifically, narratives were coded according to similar topical themes addressing, for example, the meanings of stories, self-representation, and specific dimensions of family history. Field notes were also analyzed to help clarify themes, impressions, and establish the contextual dimensions of the interviews and observations.

### **Understanding Trauma**

Experiencing and reacting to traumatic events has been a fundamental part of human history. Alan Young maintains that traumatic memory is a constructed diagnosis with roots beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “Before that time, there is unhappiness, despair, and disturbing recollections, but no traumatic memory, in the sense that we know it today” (1995, p. 141). It has been within the past century that the western world has begun to treat psychological trauma with such great attention and concern, and only within the past twenty-five years have features associated with trauma been constructed into and supported as a diagnostic category.

Trauma, as a construct within the social sciences, has questionable value due to the numerous and often ambiguous definitions spread throughout various disciplines (Leydesdorff et al., 1999; Erikson, 1995). The term trauma is Greek in origin, meaning to physically wound, disturb, or pierce the corporeal boundaries (Leydesdorff et al., 1999; Garland, 1998). Sources generally define trauma according to an acute event or insult against a person’s body or psyche. Today, its meaning is expanded to incorporate the emotional insult or shock to the mind resulting from physical and/or emotional injury. Currently, it is recognized that psychic trauma can have

an etiology in multiple experiences, as the accumulation of mild stressors over time, or as a single traumatic event (Waldram, 2004).

It is important to recognize that traumatic events do not always result in psychiatric distress; individuals, as well as societies, differ in the manner in which they experience, process, and remember events. Thus, distress resulting from a trauma experience is not due to the traumatic event per se, but the response attributed to, or meaning derived from the trauma experience (Garland, 1998; Erikson, 1995). Accordingly, it is important to differentiate between an event that may potentially cause a trauma response and an individual's actual response to trauma. It is impossible to predict and irresponsible to assume that a particular event, no matter how (in)significant, will affect two individuals or cultural groups in the same way.

The primary psychiatric diagnostic category for pathological responses to trauma experiences is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Formerly known as shell shock, PTSD was included in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition (DSM-III) in 1980 following lobbying efforts by those working to help Vietnam War Veterans gain recognition and compensation for their war-related trauma (Young, 1995). Currently, PTSD is often described as a contested diagnosis that is increasingly being used to describe a wide range of personal, social, and political traumas (Kidron, 2003), and is frequently evoked in discussions concerning historical trauma. Traumatic events that may induce PTSD symptomology include experiencing assault or other acts of violence, accidents, acts of terrorism, disasters, or news of such events, as "the trauma need not be experienced directly" (Waldram, 2004, p. 213).

Often, the construct of trauma and the unofficial use of PTSD terminology are expanded beyond the individual and applied to the collective experiences of social or ethnic groups, for



example, the Holocaust or acts of terrorism (Leydesdorff et al., 1999; Erikson, 1995). The literature has depicted a form of this collective trauma, described as historical trauma, as so virulent that there is a potential to pass on the consequences of the trauma to subsequent generations.

### **Historical Trauma**

Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines historical trauma as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7). The construct of historical trauma is used to describe the suffering of various ethnic groups, for example Aboriginal people subject to colonialism, decedents of Holocaust survivors, descendents of a legacy of slavery or war trauma, descendents of the Japanese-American interment camps during the second World War, and descendents of the Khmer Rouge violence in Cambodia (Bar-On et al., 1998; Danieli, 1998). Since the academic literature regarding descendents of the Holocaust focused increasingly on historical trauma during the 1970’s, various terms have been used to describe what is believed to be the process of transferring characteristics of trauma experiences to subsequent generations. These include, but are not limited to, collective trauma, intergenerational PTSD, historical grief, an acute reaction to colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and multigenerational trauma.

In addition to contributing to the discussion of historical trauma among American Indian people, Yellow Horse Brave Heart makes an important distinction between historical trauma and the historical trauma response (1999; 2003). She characterizes the historical trauma response by a “constellation of features” perceived as related, or as a reaction, to the historical trauma.

Unfortunately, the literature rarely acknowledges, expands upon, or distinguishes between historical trauma and the historical trauma response, a differentiation fundamental to discussions concerning the historical trauma complex, which is comprised of the two. Later, I will offer a different way of thinking about the historical trauma and will elaborate on differentiating between the trauma event and one's response. First, I provide a brief overview of the historical trauma complex.

There is significant diversity in the characteristics and mechanisms related to historical trauma and “numerous challenges to disentangling the interrelated components of the concepts and understanding what specific mechanisms are at work” (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004, p. 119). Attempts made to document the consequences of historical trauma on future generations have been extensive. Specifically, across multiple cultural groups, researchers and clinicians, using a wide array of methods, have observed characteristics such as higher levels of depression, withdrawal, various forms of anxiety, suicidal ideation and behavior, substance abuse, anger, violence, guilt behavior, and adopting a victim identity. Researchers have also noted that descendants may have difficulty in interpersonal relationships, reduced energy, pathological expression of mourning, nightmares about traumatic experiences, insomnia, social isolation, exaggerated dependency or independence, concern over betraying ancestors for being excluded from the suffering (a sort of intergenerational survivor guilt), an obligation to share ancestral pain, and a collection of other problems that are often classified as simply various other psychological or mental disorders (Kellerman, 2001; Duran et al., 1998; Kinzie et al., 1998; Raphael et al., 1998; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1998; Weiss, 1986). These problems are often exacerbated by macro-level socioeconomic conditions, poor access to health care, governmental policy, and racism (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1998).

Among many American Indian communities, historical trauma is often attributed to treaties and government policy resulting in forced removal from homelands, mandated residential schools, and forced adoption programs, as well as racism, warfare, murder, smallpox (bioterrorism), and the cumulative loss of traditional life-ways, subsistence patterns, and culture (Frey, 2001; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003). It therefore becomes comprehensible that scholars would view historical trauma as a significant cause for the various contemporary issues that plague American Indian people.

The literature contains numerous suggestions concerning the potential mechanisms involved in the transmission of historical trauma. Kellerman (2001) summarized four commonly described modes of transmission according to various psychological models: psychodynamic, sociocultural and socialization models, family systems, and biological. The psychodynamic theory contends that trauma is passed to the child through unconscious absorption of repressed and unintegrated trauma experiences. Sociocultural models focus on the direct impact the parents and social environment has on the child, as the child learns vicariously through observation. The family systems model focuses on communication between generations and the degree of enmeshment that occurs. Biological transmission postulates predisposing genetic or biological risk factors. An integrative perspective involving parts of all theories appears to be productive (Kellerman, 2001).

The transmission of trauma is frequently noted in reference to untreated or unspoken survivor trauma, as it may pass to future generations if not treated (Kidron, 2003). A frequently cited transmission mechanism of historical trauma is known as the “conspiracy of silence” (Danieli, 1998). This explicit or unstated taboo forbids the asking about or discussion of trauma. As a result of the conspiracy of silence and the difficulty survivors have in communicating their

trauma experience, children will often only receive information in fragments that are cast in mystery, thus perpetuating a narrative void surrounding the subject or experience (Abrams, 1999). However, I question the cross-cultural validity or universality of a conspiracy of silence, as such a concept pre-supposes a talking cure or prophylactic effect which may be counterintuitive to non-“Western” models of transmission. For example, healing from trauma among some men within a particular Inuit community, in part, does not require explicitly talking about problems; rather, the process of being in the silent company of another understanding person, often while out on the land or engaging in an activity, is therapeutic (Fletcher & Denham, forthcoming).

There is a tendency for researchers and professionals to use the Jewish Holocaust as a standard for which all other forms of collective traumatic experience are measured (Waldram, 2004). It is difficult to correlate the experience of second-generation Holocaust survivors with that of the experiences of Aboriginal people of North America (Weiss & Weiss, 2000; Danieli, 1981). Even assuming homogeneity among culturally similar persons experiencing a common traumatic event is irresponsible; to do so is to place individual experiences of suffering into the same category. Furthermore, one would think that it is unnecessary to emphasize the fact that we cannot draw conclusions based on people’s appearances (Danieli, 1998). Yet, the history of research with American Indian communities has proven that “researchers are prepared to assume that Aboriginal peoples are dysfunctional” (Waldram, 2004, p. 166). Falling back on a diagnosis like PTSD, or the construct of historical trauma, does little to improve the health or social difficulties that American Indian people continue to experience. Additionally, such designations fail to communicate the diversity of individual and family experiences.

Despite the level of critical analysis and deconstruction PTSD has received (see Young, 1995), little effort has been made to critically examine the intergenerational transmission of trauma or to explore it as a cultural construction (Kidron, 2003). However, there have been empirical challenges to the validity of historical trauma. For example, in a meta-analysis investigating the presence of historical trauma in the children of Holocaust survivors, van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, and Sagi-Schwartz found no evidence confirming the transmission of parental Holocaust trauma experiences to their children (2003).

Existing critiques of historical trauma research focus primarily upon study design and criticize an over-reliance on empirical data. Statistics, that often “objectify and trivialize experiences,” are not providing enough information about the subjective experiences and impact of historical trauma, and the issues at hand are more complex than the quantitative research suggests (Waldram, 2004, p. 231-232). Additionally, as with PTSD, it is efficacious to further question to what extent the construction of historical trauma as a diagnosis is being used to establish political and biomedical recognition, legitimacy, and hegemony.

Much of the literature regarding historical trauma privileges psychological or psychiatric models and explanations that center around the pathological. Indeed, such empirical literature is necessary; however, it often results in shortcomings, such as reification or reductionistic tendencies, unchecked cross-cultural assumptions resulting in limited consideration of ethnic or religious factors and their variability in the transmission process, or perspectives constrained to the immediate family rather than the socio-cultural and historical context (Gottschalk, 2003). Thus, due to the tremendous variation within and between ethnic group experiences and responses, and the paucity of literature addressing the previously listed themes, it is difficult to characterize or operationalize a definition or mechanism that can embrace the diversity of

contexts and meanings attributed to this form of human experience. In other words, I question our readiness for a diagnostic category concerning historical trauma and the validity of the concept as narrow categorization. I am not rejecting the concept of historical trauma altogether; rather, I believe that attempts to reduce and reify the concept to a narrow biomedical construct may further remove it from local understandings and modes of healing.

The following section illustrates an alternative perspective regarding the impact, transmission, and manifestation of historical trauma, through narrative vignettes gathered from ethnographic fieldwork with a Coeur d'Alene Indian family. We begin with an examination of family identity followed by a discussion concerning their historical trauma experiences and the characteristics and role of family narratives. Throughout the remainder of this paper, I offer specific vignettes positioned alongside description, interpretation, and theoretical considerations. As we approach the narratives, I find it important to note that this discussion is intended to articulate and spur conceptual thought, rather than function as a voice of empirical authority.

### **The “Rock Culture:” Grounding Family Identity**

The importance and focus upon the collective family unit and its narratives is recognized as a foundation for the Si John family. The family holds the values, customs, traditions, and memories that guide a person's actions throughout their lives. The family, as well as the greater community, transmits cultural identity and collective memories to their children, who in turn transmit it to their children. For many cultural groups within the Columbia Plateau region, this transmission of cultural knowledge is often accomplished through Sweat Ceremonies, Winter Spirit Dances, rodeos, hunting traditions, root gathering, recounting of oral history, and other activities.

The notion of collective memory is integral to understanding the transmission of identity between family members. Collective memory, also described as social memory, consists of the connection of individual memories or impressions to the thoughts of their greater social milieu (Halbwachs, 1992). Specifically, individual memories are influenced by and influence the larger collective memory, thus individual memories would not exist without the framework and influence of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992). Personal and collective memories would be lost if society did not play a role in the process of keeping the memories alive, as each collective act of remembering increases the likelihood that individuals will remember and tell their personal stories (Kirmayer, 1996).

The Si John's participation in Powwows, recounting oral histories, conducting memorial or commemorative horseback rides (reenacting rides into battle), and other activities confirms their identity and strengthens the memory of new generations. These family activities, traditions, and commemorative practices are an embodied form of collective memory that allow one to experience and connect with ancestors and the past by working to solidify kinship bonds and experiences. Such activities have the potential to move abstract events or memories of the past into the lived present (Jackson, 1998). The power and impact of such traditional activities and narratives are also enhanced by virtue of being enacted within traditional locations and at appropriate times.

The Si John family describes the process of passing on traditions and teachings within their family circle as being their "Rock Culture." The term "Rock Culture" is used as a metaphor for the dense, steady, and cohesive nature of their family culture, built upon this solid and undeniable force. The teachings and oral traditions surrounding their Rock Culture extend back to family members living before the first contact with Europeans. Cliff Si John explains:

In the Sweat House my father had a special rock that my son now holds. It is almost perfectly round like a baseball, a perfectly round rock. That's the center rock in the Sweat House when we go and make our fire. He gave that to my boy with the emphasis that it is important for him to maintain the glow of that heated rock, and not to forget.

Interestingly, Cliff described the development of their Rock Culture through business world language, specifically, using what he called "administrator terminology." Cliff explained that each teaching that comes from the family, or other source, comes from the heart and is considered "heart knowledge." Each teaching that comes from the heart can be described as a block. Therefore, each block builds upon other blocks and merges to form a foundation. This foundation, their Rock Culture, contains the teachings and narratives that extend to pre-contact times. For contextual purposes, it is important to note that the notion of the Rock Culture is unique to the Si John family, and that I am unable to address similar phenomenon existing among other tribal members. However, in a subsequent section Cliff remarks how people can apply this paradigm within their own families.

The life and teachings of specific family ancestors are of central importance to the current identity of living family members, as individual identity is primarily experienced as a continuing lineage as opposed to an individual ego. This connection to the past is maintained and expressed through bestowing ancestral names, a phenomenon that is common throughout the world (Bock, 1999). Within the Si John family, there is an honor that comes with the passage of names; an honor that perpetuates its Rock Culture and the narratives associated with specific ancestors. Naming a child after an ancestor brings that child directly into the family circle, as the ancestor is present with the child. Over time, the child establishes an embodied memory of that individual and his or her life experiences through learning the stories, personality traits, traumas, and accomplishments of the ancestor. Most importantly, this embodied connection not only links the



child or adult to a specific ancestor, but also directly connects them to the rock at the center of the fire and their larger cultural group.

Due to the manner in which memories and ancestral identity is transmitted to future generations, family members do not solely construct their sense of self according to selected “chains of *personal* memories” (Ewing, 1990, p. 253 emphasis added). Rather, family members also construct their sense of self from a network or chain of *intergenerational* memories and narratives situated within the larger socio-cultural, political, and historical context. That is, narratives and memories of previous generations, often dating back hundreds of years, are internalized by subsequent generations and used to construct one’s sense of self.

Finally, Si John parents and grandparents remind their children to, “Never forget who you are and where you come from.” Maria, Cliff’s daughter, recalls that her grandparents were always bringing up her ancestors and the struggles they had to endure. Maria explains:

Up until he died, my Grandpa always reminded us, ‘Don’t forget who you are and don’t forget to tell your children that as well.’ These are scary times for young Indian people and some just don’t have the teachings to fall back onto; their parents weren’t taught. It is scary now that young people end up getting on the wrong road not knowing who they are. They end up being lost until they are adults and then they maybe they’ll make a big turn and realize, “I know who I am.” My children hear it all the time. Even when they will leave home for college they will still hear me asking, “Who are you? What are you?”

Asking their children, “Who are you?” provides the children with constant reminders of their culture. Sitting within the circle, listening to the family songs, receiving direct instruction about family history, and taking the name of an ancestor acts as a rite of positioning; positioning the child within his or her physical, spiritual, and historical landscape. Through this process the child not only begins to gain a strong sense of self, but also learns how to maintain his or her personal as well as familial balance. Cliff discusses the importance of maintaining a balance:

So, there are so many outside influences... It's a whole different culture that is pulling at them and suddenly their Indian culture, their roots, you know, it's almost dwarfed by these outside whirlwinds that come and try to sweep them up and carry them away. Mom and dad both used to say, let your heart see things, and let your eyes touch things. Keep your balance, the center of your world inside of you, gotta stay in balance. You let it go out of balance, and your life will start getting wrecked. Alcohol and drugs can wreck the center of balance for many people, and it has. They walk around, lost. They have no connection. None.

Additionally, for the Si John family, growing up with the Rock Culture as a foundation grounds family members and helps protect them against the effects of racism, drug abuse, and other threats.

...that's where we began to learn, that room where everybody was in the evening. They would pray, tell stories, they'd visit, they'd have oral history lessons, or what amounted to that, and they'd sing songs. And my brother and I learned the songs of our family, that's where we began when we were just little babies, before we could even learn to talk, they were singing to us the songs of our family. Those special songs that were maybe a thousand years old that were handed down in this circle from those circles, those camps over there. But, these songs made their way here, to this buffer here... So that's the connection... Our father told us to never forget your Rock Culture. Practice it. One of his last breaths, he even wrote it in a letter, one of the major things he expressed is to not forget our Rock Culture.

### **Whirlwinds: Narratives of Trauma**

Larger historical events drastically affected and placed the tribe and ancestors of the Si John family at significant risk for cultural loss and other potential difficulties that are associated with the impact of colonialism. Such events included removal from traditional lands, the introduction of the smallpox virus in 1770, and various government acts and treaties. In addition to these larger historical events, numerous specific traumatic events occurred within the family specifically. Although the following section includes relevant historical events and selected narratives that illustrate aspects of these traumas, its purpose is not to provide a comprehensive overview of injustices or trauma experiences. Rather, the selected vignettes illustrate dimensions

of the family's history and provide helpful background and contextual information from the perspective of Cliff Si John.

In 1842, the coming of the Jesuit missionaries introduced not only their Catholic religious system but basic farming techniques as well. Their intent was to shift the Coeur d'Alene's lifestyle from hunting and gathering to a sedentary existence, as their seasonal round made it difficult for the Jesuits to "educate" and convert the Coeur d'Alene people. This change in subsistence strategy threatened their very identity that was so woven into the seasonal round and landscape (Frey, 2001). The drastic changes that occurred to their landscape forever changed their connection and relationship with it; it was no longer the same as it had been for their ancestors.

The Jesuits required the Coeur d'Alene people to follow their requests or suffer consequences. They were instructed to burn their *Suumesh*, or spiritual power bundle. They were given new Christian names. The children were forced to attend residential schools, cut their hair, and speak only English. The loss of a traditional name "helped transfer one's identity away from his family ancestry and perhaps animal *Suumesh* power" (Frey, 2001). The loss of their language devastated their cultural identity and the social cohesiveness that came from speaking their language. Cliff Si John describes that the ultimate mission of the Jesuits was to take the culture and tradition away from the Coeur d'Alene people, bury it forever and replace it with a "suit, short hair, a house, 40 acres, and a team of horses." Cliff remarks, "In a very short period of time the Jesuits came in and placed a cut behind the knees of the Coeur d'Alene and we've been crippled ever since." During this period, family narratives describe how it was a persistent struggle for the Si John family to maintain their Rock Culture and cultural traditions.

The Jesuits groomed a section of devout Coeur d'Alene followers called the Soldiers of the Sacred Heart. These men were involved in the enforcement of the various rules and orders passed down by the Jesuits. Cliff recalls a specific story his grandmother told him about the power of the Jesuits and the Soldiers of the Sacred Heart. He recounts the fate of an ancestor, Nick, and how one night the Soldiers of the Sacred Heart came to his house and broke through the front door looking for him:

Nick was in bed with his wife and little baby; he'd been working hard all day. I think they'd been hunting or something. And the Soldiers of the Sacred Heart said, 'Come down here we want to talk to you, because we heard that you had been drinking in Spokane,' last month, 'You were drinking whisky.' Nick hollered back down, 'Last month I was in the Huckleberry Mountains with my stepmother.' As soon as Nick showed himself these Soldiers of the Sacred Heart pulled out their pistols and shot him. Shot him down through the leg here and up right through his heart. Nick fell down; they holstered, walked out, got on their horses, and rode off. They did all kinds of things like that. In the name of the Jesuits they'd go around and club people. Go around and kill them.

The Coeur d'Alene people were also subject to direct violence from the U.S. government. Cliff describes events that were witnessed by family members. Colonel George Wright, in an effort to break the power of the Coeur d'Alene and other tribes in the area, marched 1,000 soldiers into their territory. Wright and his soldiers entered the nearby camps and wreaked havoc by running through the camps on their horses. Cliff describes the scene:

Uncle Henry told me this story when they came to this one camp, where there were just old people there, since the warriors were all out fighting. And they'd run their horses back and forth knocking these old people down and running over them with the horses.

After they were finished in the camp, the soldiers spotted dust rising above a nearby mountain and sent a small detachment to investigate. They found three girls and three boys driving some 900 head of horses over the mountain to a different camp.

As they were pushing the horses the soldiers came racing down and shot two of the girls and sabered one boy who ended up dying later. They brought the horses down, picked

out the best mounts, and killed the rest of them. Killing those 900 horses effectively placed the people on foot, right before winter with little food stores.

During this time, some of the Si John family members were deceived, captured, and hung by U.S. forces. Prior to being hung, one family member was asked if he had any final words.

He spoke:

When times get really, really tough, really hard, and you think that there is no way out, don't lie down and die. Sing this song; I leave this song for you. And it will replenish you, carry you forward, and will save your family and your children.

And he sang his power song for his family. At the completion of this song, they hung him. The story is still recounted and the song is still sung today. Cliff remarks that the song helped him many times while fighting in Vietnam.

During our conversations, Cliff also discussed his father's experience of being taken to the Jesuit school, where his hair was cut and he was whipped for speaking his language. Cliff also recounts one of his mother's residential school stories:

My mother and her sister were taken out of their home to Fort Spokane. That's where they put all the Indian kids. She was in first grade. The first day they took her tonsils out. No Novocain, nothing, just open your mouth, reached in, clipped them. She never felt so much pain in her life; screamed.

Both Cliff's mother and father ran away from their respective residential schools.

Imagine your children or grandchildren at only age seven, running away from school and going cross-county to get home. What a deep desire to return to your Indian people. They experienced that, it's hard to fathom what those kids felt like.

In addition to the descriptive nature of the family narratives, a significant dimension within the narratives places an emphasis on resistance, both in reference to interpersonal contexts and against larger structures, such as the Catholic Church. While discussing the demands and influence of the Catholic Church on the Coeur d'Alene people, Cliff recounts an event illustrating how family members refused to capitulate to the Jesuits.

At this point, most of the Coeur d'Alenes wanted to be farmers, they wanted to wear suits and take a hoe and break ground and be a farmer. Andrew was different, he held onto his traditions and his culture. There was a time when the Jesuits told all these Indians to bring their medicine bags, their buckskins, their warbonnets, all their eagle feathers, all that Indian stuff and bring it to the front of the church. They dug a hole, threw it all in there, and the burned it. They surrendered their culture. Their outfits made by their grandmother's grandmother were thrown in the hole... But, my grandmother refused to. She would not give up any of it, none of it, and she was excommunicated from the Catholic church for failing to be a good Indian. And that didn't stop her, she kept praying and went to a different church.

To describe the process of resisting and protecting the family and their way of life, family members employ the metaphor of shooting a bow. When most people imagine a bow, they understand the process of notching the arrow, pulling it back, and releasing it for flight to its target. However, family teachings surrounding the bow discuss not only how to shoot it, but also what the shooting process represents. When they shoot a bow, they notch the arrow, *push* their arm out and away from their body, rather than pull the string back, and then let go. Cliff further describes the process: "They'd hold the bow here, they'd bring it up, and push, and tink, push and tink. Just the opposite of what you'd think in the Hollywood movies, instead you punch your arm out." Cliff explains that the metaphor for pushing the bow out symbolizes "how the Coeur d'Alene people push their arm out to stop anything from hurting their families." They push out to push away racism, repression, loss or destruction of culture, and, most importantly, to defend their family, people, and land. "Extending the arm," Cliff clarifies, "was to stop anything from hurting the family. The arm, and the bow as an extension of the arm, was to keep evil away, to keep harm away. And to protect." One may hypothesize that part of being resilient within the Si John family involves adopting such narratives, metaphors, and strategies of resistance.

The Si John family narratives include countless other accounts of racism, murder, and other traumas both personally experienced and experienced by family members long past. Many

of the narratives are difficult to listen to. The distinct imagery, events, and metaphors used within the stories evoke profound feelings within family members. Combining the powerful language used, the severity and importance of the events, and the deep internalization of family history, the past traumatic events are rendered impressive importance and contribute directly to the construction and transmission of Si John identity. The following section highlights how these narratives of abuse, trauma, and resistance are framed and enacted in such a way as to promote resilience.

### **The Circle of Narratives: A Phenomenology of Family Membership**

In describing the characteristics of the Si John narratives, I employ an approach that focuses upon the “phenomenology of family membership,” a term used by Russon to identify and describe the basis for the acquisition of fundamental social structures and to delineate the nature and acquisition of the parameters within the family milieu (2003, p. 64). Within the Si John family, a principal organizing element within its Rock Culture is the protective strength offered by its circle of family teachings and narratives. In addition to naming a child after an ancestor, as previously described, cultural and family narratives act as a central method of orienting family members, and are vital in defining one’s relationship with the socio-cultural and historical environment. As this section will further clarify, family narratives, particularly trauma narratives, communicate more than the manifest content of distant events.

Although specific stories and their direct meanings are important within the family system, it is the manner in which these stories are emplotted, framed, and contextualized that is significant. Specifically, narratives are often framed according to what I characterize as a “strengths-based perspective,” a term frequently used within social work and counseling

professions. Narratives grounded within a strengths-based perspective emphasize how family members are successful at overcoming difficulties and remaining strong in the face of traumatic circumstances or change. Si John narratives emphasize what was learned or the positive outcome, as opposed to an emphasis on failure, hopelessness, or negative outcomes. Gottschalk (2003) identified a similar process in his research with descendants of Holocaust survivors. He found that replacing stories of suffering with survival stories may be a “timely method of transmitting the lessons of the Holocaust” to future generations. He also noted that currently, emphasis placed on “heroism and strength rather than on victimization and suffering has become an especially prominent narrative in Israeli society” (2003, p. 377).

The Si John family narratives clearly emphasize a resilient capability to surmount challenges, survive, and learn from mistakes. The following vignette illustrates this notion of survival. During this narrative, Cliff remarked that Native people must remember the “strength of their blood, the same blood that ran through your ancestor’s veins...”

...The blood of Chiefs and warriors; people that had to be strong. People that were warriors. People that, in the dead of winter, have starving children and have to find something to eat. Yet, they survived the whirlwinds of the government, whirlwinds of the Indian agent, whirlwinds of the stoke of a pen, whirlwinds of words that they never even understood, whirlwinds of being taken advantage of, whirlwinds of people lying to them, all of those things that come and disrupt your camp.

Within the Si John family, I found that the resilient dimensions of its narrative praxis, or the active employment, telling, and interpretation of narratives, illustrates how personal situations or experiences are given meaning and often interpreted in relation to a specific narrative or an ancestor with whom the individual closely identifies. That is, individual experience and the subsequent construction of narratives are frequently employed in direct reference to the content or structure of family trauma experiences or oral history. This differs, albeit slightly, from



Kidon's research where individuals *reemploted* their existing narratives as having been "constituted by Holocaust trauma" (2003, p. 514).

The phenomenon of actively connecting one's experience to larger socio-cultural elements is not unique. Human understandings and behaviors, observed G. H. Mead, are grounded within shared meanings that are positioned both spatially and temporally. At a fundamental level, it is necessary to have a family or a broader social group connection to interpret or generate meaning from one's experiences in a coherent and meaningful manner. Others scholars have noted that if an individual can experience a trauma as something shared by others, a sense of identification and common ground is formed (Jackson, 1998). Kirmayer remarks that, "trauma shared by an entire community creates a potential public space for retelling" (1996, p. 189). Essentially, I found that connecting one's experience with or in reference to other family members, living or departed, generates a shared space for the creation and interpretation of new narratives.

Accordingly, the shared or common experiences used to generate a mutual space for retelling do not have to occur or coincide within a shared physical location or time. It is common for a family member to draw from the content and structure of past narratives to emplot their own experiences into understandable and meaningful forms. For example, a teenager's current experience of racism at school may be emploted or made meaningful by the teen in regards to a narrative of an injustice encountered by an ancestor 100 years previous. This process is encouraged and facilitated by the ethic described by family members as the "circle of learning and teaching." Family members are encouraged to draw from past narratives of other family members and to share their experiences with others, thus contributing to the cycle of learning and teaching that connects with the knowledge dwelling within their Rock Culture.

Garro also describes how listening to the narratives of others may be used to make sense of one's own or another's experience (2003, p.6).

In the following example, Cliff discusses how the power of his family culture and the narratives he learned as a child gave him the strength to endure and survive the harsh conditions that might have taken his life. In order to survive Vietnam, Cliff came to the realization that he had to live the solitary warrior's life he had learned through family teachings. Upon returning home, Cliff also used the family circle to help frame and make sense of his experiences.

I'd think of that teaching when I was in Vietnam. I'd sit there, I'd look around and these guys would come out of the field. Crazy, we could be helicoptered into an area. Helicoptered out, back to the company area and there'd be alcohol, steaks, just flowing... and in the next day it could be deep in mud fighting some guy who didn't have steaks, didn't have booze, didn't have women. So I moved out of the barracks... I began sleeping on the ground. So this life, entertainment life, stayed completely away from it in order to save my life. So hence, this teaching of pushing my arm out saved me. All the teachings that I learned from that room.

After I got home from Vietnam it took me a while to sort this all out. I could not have done it without my father. We went right back to that circle. He began talking about people and the hard things in their lives and how they handled them; some of them died. We went right back to that connection within the family circle again.

In the following example, Maria, Cliff's daughter, also discusses a difficult experience in reference to her family teachings and narratives. After living in Europe for three years, Maria admits that she had some struggles living far away from home, but that having the foundation of her family teachings to fall back upon helped her through the difficult periods and situations she encountered:

You learn from it, learn from it and try to absorb as much as you can... I think I could have crumbled up in the corner and cried my head off. But, I could just hear my grandma and grandpa talking to me, what are you going to do? ...It was the teachings, being cemented and strong.

### **The Role of Narrative in Trauma Experiences**

Similar to grounding one's experiences within the larger socio-cultural group, forming a coherent narrative of trauma experiences, psychologist Pierre Janet noted, necessitates that the individual also take the experiences of others into account. The individual transformation cannot simply occur through the active gathering of memories; rather, the most important process is to shape and subsequently articulate the narrative within a specific social context (Mattingly & Garro, 2000; van der Kolk & van der Hart in Jackson, 2002, p. 56). Storytelling, claims Jackson, enables people to live in the present with what happened in their past by facilitating existential mastery over their experiences and mediating our relation to, or existential balance between, ourselves and the worlds or "spheres of otherness" that extend beyond us (1998, p. 24; 2002, p. 23). In other words, Blixen notes, "All sorrows can be born if you can put them into a story or tell a story about them" (cited in Jackson 1998, p. 24). Garro (2003) also discusses how narrative can order, situate, and provide meaning for troubling experiences. Thus, recounting past narratives and emplotting new experiences, particularly within the Si John family, provides an historical perspective that facilitates the control and integration of experiences or events. Additionally, the act of speaking of one's experiences, or of those of an ancestor, permits the understanding and negotiation of the self as located within the context of a larger family narrative.

In their raw state, trauma memories often differ from normal memories, as they may lack a cohesive plot and narrative development (Greenberg, 1998, p. 324). Therefore, a person's ability to manage a traumatic experience is related to her ability to place the experience into narrative form (Jackson, 2002). It is possible, Janet describes, that vivid memory fragments resulting from trauma experiences resist integration into mental structures, therefore rendering the individual incapable of generating a narrative (Hopper & van der Kolk, 2001).

Further elaborating upon Janet's observations, we can theorize that trauma experiences are not immediately transcribed into a narrative or symbolic form, rather, van der Kolk and Fisler note, the experiences are initially imprinted as sensations or feeling states. "The resulting 'speechless terror' leaves memory traces that may remain unmodified by the passage of time, and by further experience" (1995, p. 511). If severe or persistent, these trauma experiences may result in a fragmentation of one's sense of self or identity (Caruth, 1996; Greenberg, 1998; Crossley, 2000) and may require organization and sense-making in the effort to rebuild an individual's shattered sense of identity that results (Crossley, 2000).

Further expansion upon the concept and connections surrounding the intergenerational transmission of fragmented trauma narratives, or the fragmented "history" within historical trauma, may benefit individuals or communities suffering from the effects of intergenerational trauma. Particularly, for cultural groups where the "conspiracy of silence" mechanism of transmission is valid, resolving or rendering a fragmented familial or historical narrative into a coherent symbolic and meaningful form may prove to be helpful.

The previous two sections identified how the passage of family narratives within the Si John family is a central mode of orienting an individual in relation to the family and social environment. Specifically, the circle of trauma narratives, framed and emploted from a strengths-based perspective, acts as a protective factor by providing the individual with the skills and confidence that is central to their resilience process. This occurs, in part, through the system of encouraging the family members to effectively connect to, generate meaning from, and establish control over an experience by way of the strategies offered by the larger family narrative. According to Cliff, this strategy keeps their lives in balance and prevents the "whirlwinds from wrecking the center."

## **Giving Back**

Although the primary purpose of this paper is to draw attention to an alternative response to historical trauma, this endeavor may also inform applied efforts. Foremost, it is important to note that the process and the examples of the Si John family are not representative of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe as a whole, nor can they be readily transported to other individuals or cultures. Additionally, this process is not a singular source of resilience for the family; however, I do see it as fundamental. With this in mind, and per Cliff Si John's request, I briefly discuss the applicability of the Si John's strategies for others.

As discussed earlier, care providers may find use in focusing upon the creation and maintenance of narratives in an effort to resolve or integrate a fragmented or misunderstood past, and to help individuals and communities negotiate and establish the meaning of contemporary or historical experiences. Second, focusing on survival or adopting a strengths-based perspective may also be useful. Such expressions of strength will not mirror the Si John family's process specifically; however, attempting to redirect, focus on, or narrate what went right has merit. Some individuals may find that the current generation may be unwilling to adopt narratives of survival, claiming that is it too late. However, this approach still holds value for transmitting the experiences to future generations (Gottschalk, 2003).

During one interview, Cliff elaborated on how the Si John family teachings have relevancy beyond his family, particularly for individuals and families that have been unable to maintain familial and cultural continuity. He discussed how an individual without a history or "circle" of family narratives could begin to turn his life around, as each individual and family has

a circle waiting to be filled. If a person does not immediately have the teachings to connect with, they can begin their own circle by starting with their own stories. Cliff explains the process:

Here is what I am going to put into my circle: I have children; I decide this is what we are going to talk about, these are the values that we will discuss. Pretty soon that child marries, has kids, and says, “My dad used to talk to me, here is what he said.” Many circles later: “My great grandpa used to talk to me when I was a baby, I didn’t know him, but this is what he said.”

If they are strong, the person that is lost, in pain, or “facing the edge” can turn around, create, and begin to fill his or her own circle. Cliff remarks that with the help of another person, and even sometimes alone, many people can take control of their life experiences and use those experiences to fill their circle:

Any part of your life can be used, set aside as a part of the circle, a teaching. For example: “I was lost, I drank, I headed to Seattle, got in fights, went to jail, etc., but I learned from it.” If you stand all those life experiences up it would be a tower of information, or it can just lay on its side forever. But, if you tip it up it can reach out far to another circle over here and you can use the stuff from that circle for yours and pass it on. Then your great grandchildren can learn from this period in your life.

It speaks, that’s what it does. I have seen it. When they race across here to change their life, they also want to change everybody else’s life around them. And suddenly their kids start dancing, suddenly they start going to Powwows; their whole perspective changes. Sometimes it works and it all comes together.

In an effort to “bring things into balance,” the Si John family recognizes the importance of teaching, as opposed to learning, taking, and never giving back. The cycle of learning must be completed by giving something back to that circle. “Take what knowledge you have gained in your life, use it somewhere else, and return it back to the circle.” Cliff continues:

Through the wisdom of this family and the Rock Culture we have been able to keep up with the day, from sunup to sundown. Keeping that Rock Culture and the continuity of teaching and learning, teaching and learning. I guess it is a simple formula for our family.

## **From Suffering to Survival: Rethinking Historical Trauma**

In light of the Si John family's response to historical trauma, I find it necessary to consider alternative non-pathological outcomes of the historical trauma complex. According to the definition provided by Yellow Horse Brave Heart (2003), historical trauma requires cumulative "emotional and psychological wounding" to substantiate its existence. This definition thus raises an important question: If a descendant does not manifest an emotional wound or dysphoric response to historical trauma or the circumstances it may exasperate, can we consider her as being affected by historical trauma and her reaction, or lack thereof, a historical trauma response?

To answer this question, it may be helpful to articulate the important difference between historical trauma and the historical trauma response. Most frequently, historical trauma is regarded as both the history or experience of trauma and the resultant impact or constellation of behaviors. A more accurate conceptualization or definition of historical trauma would refer only to the conditions, experiences, and events that have the *potential* to contribute to or trigger a response, rather than referring to both the events and the response. Accordingly, the subsequent manifestation of or reaction to historical trauma, which, I posit, varies from expressions of suffering to expressions of resilience and resistance, are appropriately recognized as the historical trauma response.

Therefore, returning to the question at hand, I believe a pathological or dysphoric historical trauma response should not be a requirement to validate the presence or impact of historical trauma. Future definitions and discussions regarding the historical trauma complex should consider the potential for alternative and potentially resilient expressions. Increasing critical exploration and challenge of the historical trauma complex will not likely weaken it as a

construct; rather, it will widen our understandings of and the practical efforts towards culturally appropriate responses to individual and collective trauma experiences.



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