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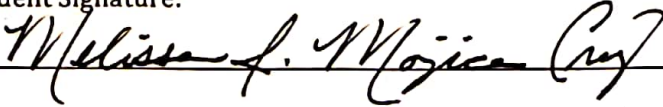
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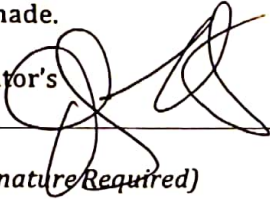
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**Historical Trauma and its Impact on Minority Populations**

**Senior Project**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
The Esther G. Maynor Honors College  
University of North Carolina at Pembroke**

**By**

**Melissa I. Mojica Cruz  
Social Work  
December 4, 2019**

*Melissa I. Mojica Cruz*

**Melissa I. Mojica Cruz  
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**Joshua K. Busman, Ph.D.  
Senior Project Coordinator**

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### Abstract

Historical trauma is a type of trauma that leaves lasting impacts throughout generations of people. In this literature review, the definition of historical trauma will be expanded upon and compared to the definition of post traumatic stress disorder in regards their impact. While historical trauma affects many populations, this review will only focus on three: Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic/Latinx. With each population, the cultural and health impacts of historical trauma will be discussed. The cultural impacts will explore the initial or most prominent source of historical trauma and how it affects present day. The health impacts will expand on how having these traumas even before an individual is born can impact their longevity and quality of life. Based on these findings, recommendations for future research to better understand historical trauma and its impact on groups will be made.

*Keywords:* historical trauma, adverse childhood experiences, impact

### Historical Trauma and its Impact on Minority Populations

In the United States of America, historical trauma has been embedded in the culture of several populations. It can apply to the enslaved African Americans, the evicted and assimilated Native Americans, and the caged Mexican, Japanese, and Jewish populations whose trauma is still being felt by their descendants decades later. In the field of social work, there will come a time when a client comes presents an issue as simple as anxiety and it could be traced back to any historical trauma that may have happened to them or their ancestors. Due to that, the importance of looking into historical trauma and the impact it has on these populations will prove to be beneficial not only to increase the cultural awareness of the social worker but to provide the best practice possible to the client.

### **Historical Trauma**

Historical trauma is trauma that is still being felt generations after the initial incident had occurred by a large group of people (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, & Altschul, 2011). Gone (2013) goes into further detail by describing this trauma as spanning from psychosocial to socioeconomic facets. This definition does have similarities to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but the two concepts are distinctly different on several levels. Gone (2013) continues to expand on that by arguing historical trauma as more complex through its inception and outcomes whereas PTSD is straightforward about the cause, interventions, and outcomes. A difference is that historical trauma is intergenerational while PTSD is seen mainly in a single individual (Gone, 2013). Another difference is historical trauma in the

perspective of Gone (2013) is that historical trauma is cumulative regarding the impact it has on the group over time versus the single individual PTSD impacts.

### **Cultural Impacts**

Within the minority populations of Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics the cultural impact of historical trauma can still be seen in present times. One of the more severe examples are with the Native American populations (Burnette & Figley, 2016). The historical traumas they have experienced stem from being stripped of their land, traditions, self-respect, familial ties, amongst others (Burnette et al, 2016). As time continued to move forward, the generations that followed have had this sense of distrust, intergenerational anger, and cultural shame when surrounded by people of European decent (Burnette et al, 2016). This was further confirmed by Comas-Diaz, Hall and Neville (2019) when they pinpointed the beginning of historical trauma for Native Americans as being caused by the arrival of the Europeans and the negative prospects they brought. Comas-Diaz et al. (2019) specified that historical trauma for Native Americans were racially based which deteriorated their cultural identity and spirituality.

Like Native Americans, African Americans experienced racial historical trauma originating from being taken from their ancestral homes and shipped to the Americas where they were enslaved by the settlers that worked in plantations (Slavery, n.d). That historical trauma is the beginning of the racism and discrimination that continues today. In present day, African Americans feel that their livelihood, opportunities, and safety are threatened by Caucasians which is



affirmed by the large amount of police brutality, murders, and discrimination being done (Chama, 2019). Their culture was impacted from the historical trauma to be wary and cautious of where they are and who they are with. Another impact to the culture was that the cultural identity of this population has been being distorted. After slavery was abolished, this population was in a position where they did not recognize Africa as their home because they were born and raised in the States, but they did not feel they belonged in the States either. They lost touch with their cultural roots and in some cases have no way of ever finding them.

Lastly, with the Hispanic/Latinx population, the historical trauma they have experienced arise from the immigration policies and practices the United States have established (Comas-Diaz et al. 2019). For the last decade, immigration has been a topic of discussion for the nation. However, the current administration has taken further steps and has persecuted a subset of this population by imprisoning them, separating families, and shutting down the President Obama's executive order for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The Dream Act and DACA were the best ways for immigrant youth to get a higher education and potentially gain citizenship (UC Berkeley, n.d). The cultural impact on this population is that for the last decade, more and more immigrants along with the rest of the Hispanic/Latinx community has been experiencing racial discrimination as a result of this trauma (Krogstad & Lopez, 2016). No matter the country of origin, social and news media along with the current administration has been painting Hispanics in general as rapists, thieves, and murderers. Like the previous populations, there is a

growing sense of cultural shame about speaking another language or saying where you are from in fear of discrimination or being threatened.

### **Health Impacts**

The health impacts of historical trauma of all populations discussed are best described by the CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. The CDC-Kaiser ACE study was a study was conducted by the Center of Disease Control to investigate the impact of adverse childhood experiences (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, Koss, & Marks, 1998). Adverse childhood experiences are defined under the categories of injury, mental health, maternal health, infectious disease, chronic disease, risky behaviors, and opportunities (Felitti, 1998). The major findings of the study are that the more adverse childhood experiences an individual has, the higher the risk factors for disease and quality of life (Felitti, 1998). From the point of conception, the framework for the ACE study has historical trauma as one of the earliest forms of an adverse childhood experiences (Felitti, 1998). Going further down life, historical trauma has the capacity to lead to disrupted neurodevelopment, social, emotional, and cognitive impairment, participating in health risk behaviors, early disease, disability, and social problems, and finally early death (Felitti, 1998). With what each population experiences as their historical trauma, on top of what is presently being experienced as a result from said trauma, it is providing opportunity for those risk factors to come to fruition.

### **Recommendations for Areas of Research**

From each article it was noticed that the authors put a lot of emphasis on one specific population rather than including other examples in their article. A recommendation for future research would be to create a meta-analysis of all the large minority populations in the United States of America and how historical trauma has impacted each of them. Another recommendation would be to find new ways to build resilience for these communities and continue to advocate for them by finding effective interventions for these groups.

### **Conclusion**

As previously mentioned, in the field of social work trauma does affect many clients that we serve. In regard to minority populations, racial historical trauma is being felt with almost the same intensity as in years past. The importance of understanding and being aware of historical trauma is vital to providing clients with the best practice and interventions possible. In this review, historical trauma with Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic/Latinx communities were discussed and how each one is being impacted both culturally and psychosocially. The implications for this review include raising more awareness about historical trauma particularly with the political climate the United States is in.

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