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## **Discrimination, Racism, Social Inequality, and Injustice Experienced Among Native Hawaiians through the Lens of Historical Trauma**

Cynthia Greywolf<sup>a\*</sup>, John Lowe<sup>b</sup>, John Casken<sup>c</sup>, Merle Kataoka-Yahiro<sup>d</sup>,  
Eugenia Millender<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>PhD, DNP-PMHNP, BC, Assistant Professor, University of Hawaii, Manoa, Nancy Atmospera-Walsh School of Nursing, 2528 Mccarthy Mall, Honolulu, HI, 96822.

<sup>b</sup>PhD, RN, FAAN, the University of Texas, Austin, School of Nursing, 1710 Red River St. Austin, Texas

<sup>c</sup>PhD, RN, the University of Hawaii, Manoa, Nancy Atmospera-Walsh School of Nursing, 2528 McCarthy Mall, Webster 429, Honolulu, HI, 78622, USA

<sup>d</sup>DrPH, MS, APRN, the University of Hawaii, Manoa, Nancy Atmospera-Walsh School of Nursing, 2528 McCarthy Mall, Webster 429, Honolulu, HI, 78622, USA

<sup>e</sup>PhD, RN, PMHNP, CDE, FAAN, Florida State University, School of Nursing, Vivian Duxbury Hall, 98 Varsity Way, Tallahassee, FL, 32306, USA.

<sup>a</sup>Email: [cynthiat@hawaii.edu](mailto:cynthiat@hawaii.edu), <sup>b</sup>Email: [john.lowe@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:john.lowe@austin.utexas.edu), <sup>c</sup>Email: [casken@hawaii.edu](mailto:casken@hawaii.edu)

<sup>d</sup>Email: [merle@hawaii.edu](mailto:merle@hawaii.edu), <sup>e</sup>Email: [emillender@fsu.edu](mailto:emillender@fsu.edu)

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of colonization and historical trauma and links to alcohol among Native Hawaiians living in rural Hawaii. Native American groups including, American Indians, and Alaska Natives have experienced historically traumatic events over the past 500 years, after contact with Europeans. Some Indigenous scholars have posited that historical trauma is a primary cause of the current social pathology and health disparities in Native Hawaiians.

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\* Corresponding author.

A phenomenological design was selected for this study using Indigenous storytelling methodology. Two themes

emerged including: a) the participants described experiences of negative stereotyping that leads to perceived discrimination and racism which is a trigger for increased thoughts of historical losses including the loss of identity; b) the participants described experiences of social inequality and injustices which has increased the use of alcohol and methamphetamine as a way to cope by self-medicating. There remains the need for investigators to examine whether the type of experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice differ for people of various racial-ethnic backgrounds, especially Indigenous people. It is necessary for researchers to examine the impact of these experiences to clarify the prevalence and effects on health and health behaviors.

**Keywords:** Native Hawaiian; Native American; Historical Trauma; Colonization; Discrimination; Alcohol.

## **1. Introduction**

American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians are the Indigenous people of what is now the United States (U.S.). There are approximately 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native groups also referred to as tribes, groups, nations, bands, pueblos, communities, and villages of which two hundred and twenty-nine are located in Alaska while the remainder are located in thirty-five other states [1]. Additionally, there are state recognized tribes located throughout the United States recognized by their respective state governments. Native Hawaiians, known as Pacific Islanders, are Indigenous to the Hawaiian Islands and do not have federal recognition. Native Hawaiians remain marginalized within their original homelands and continue to deal with the destructive legacy of colonization of Native lands, and subsequently the loss of identity, negative stereotyping, and discrimination [2].

Millions of Indigenous people died including whole tribes from communicable diseases and the introduction and dissemination of alcohol as White settlers colonized Indigenous lands (3, 4, 5). U.S. policies were designed as tools to destroy traditions, languages, cultures, and identities. Furthermore, these policies were designed to justify, maintain, and perpetuate systems of settler-colonialism and to eliminate Indigenous people (6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12). By the 1890's there were approximately 250,000 Indigenous people remaining [13]. As part of the process of eradicating the Indigenous identity, culture, language children were taken from their homes and placed in boarding schools run by Christian missionaries. Many of these Indigenous children suffered from physical, and sexual abuse leading to acute traumatic experiences which continue to be transmitted across generations as intergenerational trauma [14].

Today historical events and contemporary stereotypes continue to impact the mental and social health of Indigenous people who are often categorized and discriminated against because of how they look, where they live and for their cultural practices. Non-Indigenous people tend to invalidate, nullify, and exclude the Indigenous experience of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice, even in the face of evidence (12, 14).

Quick assumptions are often made associating Indigenous people with poverty and alcoholism. Well-known stereotypes are the use of Native American mascots for sports teams. Native Americans have consistently argued that these mascots are racist and have had a negative impact on the self-esteem and sense of self-worth

on their children [12]. Indigenous people often struggle to make meaning of their identity and place in the world. The examination of ethnic identity involves consideration of past historical atrocities. The proximal issues of racism, discrimination, oppression, and marginalization have worsened the problems that affects mental health, and that awareness of adverse historical atrocities is associated with depression, anxiety, PTSD, alcohol and other substance abuse and unresolved grief (15, 16, 14, 17, 18).

Researchers have proposed that the health disparities that exist among all Indigenous people, stem from the experiences of colonization and historical trauma (16, 19, 20, 17, 2). Historical traumatic events are considered a stressor that directly harms the health and encourages health risk behaviors such as substance use. The prevalence of alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among Native Hawaiians is greater than other ethnic groups of all ages in Hawaii [16]. The prevalence of severe or moderately severe depression was 4.8% among Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, almost twice as high as the state prevalence (2.7%) and 3 times higher than the prevalence for Asians in Hawaii (1.5%). Though Hawaii residents have the greatest longevity of all 50 states, Native Hawaiians have the shortest lifespans and life expectancies, 9-13 years shorter than other ethnic groups in Hawaii [21].

## **2. Historical Trauma Conceptual Framework**

The Historical Trauma Conceptual framework guided this study [22]. The framework provides an explanation of how historical trauma is initiated and perpetuated through intergenerational transmission to subsequent generations through present-day experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice. Experiences of historical trauma begins with the successful dominance of an Indigenous group which requires devastating physical and psychological violence, displacement and segregation, denial of resources, and cultural dispossession.

The Indigenous group's experiences of oppression and catastrophic losses threaten their cultural and economic survival. The psychological responses to these elements stem from experiences of violence, stress, unremitting hardships, and grief over the losses of land, culture, and people is perpetuated with current experiences of racism, discrimination, social inequality, and injustice [22].

Secondhand traumatization occurs through oral traditions where the traumatic memories become entrenched in the collective memories of descendants who share the ancestral pain and unresolved grief with their ancestors [23].

## **3. Research Question**

The focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice among rural Native Hawaiians through the lens of historical trauma. Native Hawaiians have a poorer socioeconomic status and report greater trauma exposure over the lifespan than individuals of other ethnic backgrounds in Hawaii. There is lack of research using the historical trauma framework which creates an urgent need to explore the gaps in the current knowledge base.

**4. Method**

Moustakas’ transcendental phenomenological research design, grounded on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, was utilized for this study [24]. This research design is founded on comprehensive descriptions of meanings, perceptions, and experiences of the phenomena under study. Moustakas' Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis was used to analyze the data. Institutional Review Board approval was sought and obtained at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in Honolulu preceding the beginning of the study.

**5. Sample**

**Table 1: Demographics Table.**

Characteristics	#
Gender	
Male	2
Female	8
Age (in Years)	
30-39	3
40-49	2
50-59	5
Ethnicity	
Native Hawaiian	10
Family Roots	
Hawaiian	10
Education	
Some High School (No Diploma)	1
High School/Diploma/GED	1
Some College Credit (No Diploma)	2
Trade/Technical/Vocational Training	1
Associates Degree	1
Bachelor’s Degree	1
Master’s Degree	1
Professional Degree	1
Doctorate Degree	1
Marital Status	
Married or Domestic Partner	8
Divorced	2
Employment Status	
Employed for Wages	7
Self Employed	1
A Homemaker	1
Retired	1

The participants (N=10) were selected with purposive nonprobability sampling in a remote area of Hawaii. Participant inclusion criteria for this study required: 1) Native Hawaiians living in the remote area of Hawaii who were between the ages of 30 to 60 years old, 2) self-identification as Native Hawaiian, 3) able to speak English, 4) willingness to have face-to-face interviews that were audio recorded and complete a demographic questionnaire, and 5) signed informed consent.

**5.1 Data Collection and Analysis**

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at mutually agreed locations. The duration of the interviews were between 40 to 80 minutes. Table 2 provides the list of questions used to guide the interviews.

**Table 2:** Guiding Interview Questions.

1. What is the history of the State of Hawaii
2. Please share stories that have been passed down in the area you live in that are related to the arrival of Captain Cook in 1778
3. What is the health status and situation of Native Hawaiians as compared to other ethnic groups living in Hawaii today
4. What was the Native Hawaiian health status when Captain Cook arrived in Hawaii compared to the health status of Native Hawaiians now
5. Please share about the use of alcohol by Native Hawaiians in your area currently
6. Have the kupuna (elders) ever talked about alcohol usage when they were growing up
7. Have you heard anyone use the word colonization, and if so, what does it mean to you
8. Have you heard of the words' historical trauma, and if so, what does that mean to you?

The interview data were transcribed verbatim using NVivo10 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International). The demographic information was used to describe the sample. Each participant was given \$25 dollar gift card as an incentive. The interviews were recorded and entered verbatim to ensure accuracy of information shared by the participants. Inductive analysis was used to answer the research questions which assisted the researcher to reduce the raw data into meaning units and ultimately into two themes guided by the research questions. Moustakas' Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was ideal for this analysis since all participants represented in the study sample reported similar experiences of negative stereotyping, identity struggles, perceived discrimination, and racism, and coping by using alcohol and other substances [24].

Reliability of the data was established through criticality, authenticity, integrity, and credibility. Audit trails documenting each aspect of the study and analyses enhanced criticality. Member checking was used to assure authenticity. The participants were asked to clarify questions following their interviews to confirm accuracy of their interview data. Integrity was accomplished through participant consent after a full explanation of the study purpose, process, and procedures.

**5.2. Results**

Two overarching core themes emerged from the data that were guided by the Historical Trauma Conceptual framework [22]. The themes are related to the experiences of

discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice.

**Core Theme 1** The participants described experiences of negative stereotyping that leads to perceived discrimination and racism which is a trigger for increased thoughts of historical losses including the loss of identity. Example of experiences are embedded in participant statements such as:

“Sometimes I would cry. You know just call my mom because just because I’m Native Hawaiian they think these things like I don’t know nothing. Like I’m stupid. I’m not stupid. I’m educated you know for anyone. Native Hawaiians aren’t considered smart as other people.”

“Even in schools if you’re not White or you’re not Oriental then you’re nobody you know, and It’s sad. You know like I can kind of relate to what Black people go through. Right, well you know like the Mexicans... even the Indians are not accepted if you’re not White.

Then you’ve got to work harder to prove who you are. They think we are lazy. It’s hard to know you are worthy. It didn’t used to be that way before.”

“They are trying to erase our ethnic Group. Trying to erase our past. While trying to stop you from learning the true meaning of what happened and demanding that we learn their ways.”

**Core Theme 2** The participants described experiences of social inequality and injustices which has increased the use of alcohol and methamphetamine as a way to cope by self-medicating.

“People are self-medicating away a lot of the pain. Alcoholism in our younger generation is really out of control almost as much as the meth is so out of control and it’s imported on a daily basis. Once we legalize marijuana there’s no way there’s no way we can make a life.

I mean get rid of it. So, drugs are here to stay if they do that. It’s like the meth, the alcohol, plus the marijuana. And it’s sad because course now they keep interjecting new drugs all the time you know it was alcohol. Now it’s like alcohol is not the bigger issue. So, we’ve got to get something stronger. Let’s get meth. Meth is more stronger. Oh, let’s get marijuana so they’re legalizing these stronger stuffs instead of handling the situation.”

“Native Hawaiians we’re pushed down too so we use alcohol. I just recently lost my fiancée, and he had a bad upbringing and he dealt with a lot of demons. So, he did drugs. He did meth. He took meth for practically his whole life. He got congestive heart failure. All of this is because once somebody strips your identity of who you are, then it’s hard because it brings down the self-esteem.”

“So, I’m trying my best to feel like I’m worthy. I’m a good person. When you get people always knocking you down it’s hard. And I see that a lot in our community.

Because you’re expected to be a certain way. Especially for men. And that’s what they do to cope themselves is alcohol or drugs.”

## 6. Discussion

The experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice shared by the participants are consistent with Sotero’s Historical Trauma Conceptual framework [22]. According to Sotero, the traumatic memories are embedded in the collective memories of the group where the successive generations experience secondhand trauma through the collective memory and storytelling [21]. The findings also confirmed Brave Heart’s definition of historical trauma as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” [9, p.1]. According to Brave Heart unresolved grief and alcohol and substance use occurs as a result of the experiences of historical trauma [8]. Participant experiences confirmed that negative stereotypes resulted in discrimination and racism which triggered historical loss thinking. These experiences lead to maladaptive behaviors and social problems such as alcohol and substance abuse, and physical abuse which perpetuates the intergenerational cycle of trauma.

Other studies have discovered similar findings such as Pokhrel and Herzog’s examination of Native Hawaiian college students’ relationship between historical trauma, perceived discrimination and substance use including alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use [2]. Participants in this study also reported experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice in situations where their grandparents and great-grandparents were forced not to speak their Native language or practice cultural traditions forbidding hunting, fishing, and food gathering.

Myhra’s study on the experiences of intergenerational transmission of historical trauma among American Indians and Alaska Natives were similar to the Native Hawaiian participants’ experiences [25].

The American Indian and Alaska Native participants also described s experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice which contributed to the existence of continuing traumatic stress often resulting in poverty, substance use, and poor health.

**Table 3:** Comparison of Participant Experiences with Stereotypes.

Native Hawaiians (Greywolf, and colleagues)	Native Hawaiians (Pokhrel & Herzog)	Native Americans (Myhra and colleagues)
<i>alcohol abusers</i>	<i>alcoholics</i>	<i>drunks</i>
<i>lazy</i>	<i>not good workers</i>	<i>never amount to nothing</i>
<i>poor self-care</i>	<i>suspicious behavior</i>	<i>dirty</i>
<i>not as intelligent</i>	<i>less intelligent</i>	<i>lacking identity</i>
<i>easy target for erasure</i>	<i>treated with less respect</i>	<i>lacking self-esteem</i>
<i>poor coping skills</i>	<i>stressed</i>	<i>inability to deal with stress</i>

### 6.1. Prevention and intervention Through Future Research and Clinical Practice

Attention to the important issue of colonization and historical trauma that are impacting current experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice among Indigenous peoples is emerging within the research literature. Although empirical studies and accompanying measures still focus primarily on the impact of post-traumatic stress, and other mental health disorders such as depression, stress, and anxiety (2, 10),

scholars are calling for greater focus on experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice (8,7).

There remains the need for investigators to examine whether the type of experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice differ for people of various racial-ethnic backgrounds, especially Indigenous people. It is necessary for researchers to examine the impact of these experiences to clarify the prevalence and effects on health and health behaviors. Many researchers do not have an extensive understanding of how the experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice can impact an entire group of Indigenous people within a shared and collective community. Current practice concerns include the need to address the consequences of the experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice among Native Hawaiians and other Indigenous people. One of the most important clinical questions regarding the treatment of any presenting problem is how to conceptualize and treat symptomatology within different racial and ethnic groups. While some researchers argue for cultural adaptation to existing interventions [26], others argue the need for targeted interventions created with cultural specificity [27]. Others consider a focus on race and ethnicity within interventions to promote positive health outcomes [28]. Although programming approaches can differ, what is less known is in what capacity the topics of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice are effectively managed across health care and community settings. The literature indicates this is an area of challenge for many clinicians [29]. While researchers may contend with the notion of clinician's cultural competence, few studies have conceptualized discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice as a focus of clinical practice [30]. The information collected in this study can inform interventions and treatment modalities that address the root causes for behaviors such as the use of alcohol and methamphetamine and other negative health behaviors.

## **7. Conclusion**

Given the limited research focus on understanding the impact of colonization and historical trauma on experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustice among Native Hawaiians and other Indigenous people in the U.S., the results of this study provide insight into the influence of these experiences on their health and wellbeing. Colonization and historical trauma are not the only cause of experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequity, and injustices among Indigenous people in the United States. Nevertheless, existing evidence suggests that experiences of discrimination, racism, social inequality, and injustices does continue to affect the health and wellbeing of Native Hawaiians and other Indigenous people.

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