

Intergenerational Trauma in the Native American Population: A Literature Review



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Introduction

Background:

Native American populations have been subject to many atrocities over the course of history. Some of these events include colonization, forced removal onto specified parcels of land (reservations), and forced boarding school attendance. This has led to the development of various issues, many of which are still prominent issues in Native American communities today. One of the potential contributing factors to these issues is intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma has been known by various names. It is most commonly referred to as intergenerational trauma, generational trauma, transgenerational trauma, multigenerational trauma or historical trauma. Intergenerational trauma is trauma that is passed down through generations. This type of trauma has been spread throughout Native American communities through historically destructive events including colonization, loss of culture/language, and forced assimilation, all of which have started and maintained various cycles of abuse.

Purpose:

The prominence of this issue and the rampant negative effects involving health disparities and mental health issues in Native American communities shows why it is important to investigate this type of trauma. In order to determine which areas need to be assessed, it is important to examine the research that has already been published. The current research sought out to complete a systematic review of prior research on intergenerational trauma.

Methods

Materials:

The current research consisted of a literature review of sources discussing intergenerational trauma. Around 50 sources were examined, which was narrowed down to 30 articles. The literature search was conducted on PsycINFO, which was accessed through the UND online database.

Procedure:

The initial search involved using descriptive terms including the various terms for intergenerational trauma and the various terms for Native American. The terms for intergenerational trauma including intergenerational trauma, transgenerational trauma, multigenerational trauma, or historical trauma. The terms for Native American including Native American, American Indian, or Indigenous. A few of the sources were also found through examining the reference lists of some of the sources. Peer reviewed journal articles were assessed throughout the research process. A few books and dissertations were considered as supplemental sources.

Results

General Results:

The research showed that intergenerational trauma is a fairly new term, as it was defined and examined in the 1990s by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (Gone, 2019). Over the years there has been some research on intergenerational trauma in Native American communities, but overall, there are still various aspects that require further assessment and research. Throughout the data collection process, six common themes were found throughout the published journal articles. These themes are listed in table 1.

Specific Theme Results:

Out of the academic journal articles and supplementary sources, 14 articles sought out to establish a link to mental health. 8 articles sought out to establish a link to substance abuse. 2 articles sought to establish a link to increased crime rates and/or high-risk behavior. 15 articles attempted to define and describe intergenerational trauma, and some suggested that more precise definitions may be needed. 5 articles examined prior research. 19 sought out to find, develop, and/or test treatment methods, and some stressed that incorporating cultural practices and/or group therapy may be useful in treating intergenerational trauma. 3 consulted and/or stressed the importance of consulting Native American elders or the Native American community. 2 created and/or tested tools intended to measure or screen for intergenerational trauma.

Table 1: Common Themes of Intergenerational Trauma Research

Number	Theme
Theme 1a	Examined link between intergenerational trauma and mental health
Theme 1b	Examined link between intergenerational trauma and substance abuse
Theme 1c	Examined link between intergenerational trauma and crime or other issues
Theme 2	Defining intergenerational trauma
Theme 3	Examining research on intergenerational trauma
Theme 4	Finding, developing, or testing treatment methods of intergenerational trauma
Theme 5	Consulting Native American elders or community
Theme 6	Creation or testing of measurement/screening tools

Image Illustrating Destruction & Loss of Native American Culture



Woodard, T. (2016). Historical trauma. Alaska Public Media NPR. <https://www.alaskapublic.org/2016/02/05/historical-trauma/>

Discussion

Overall, multiple aspects of intergenerational trauma have been investigated, but some require further research, such as expansion or replication. Various researchers have published articles that define what intergenerational trauma is, but some still believe that more precise definitions are needed. Researchers have also begun investigating the link between intergenerational trauma to issues including mental health issues, substance abuse, crime/high risk behavior, and other similar issues. Researchers have suggested and found results that support that including culture in treatment of intergenerational trauma may be effective.

Implications:

The defining of this issue has helped to shed light on part of the reason why Native Americans struggle with these negative issues at higher rates than the general population. The research conducted has led to research on ways to test for the occurrence of intergenerational trauma. Multiple researchers have developed tools to measure and screen for intergenerational trauma. Many of these are new and need further research, but the development of these tools suggests that individuals will be able to reliably be screened for intergenerational trauma. Understanding underlying issues is a key aspect of determining how to treat/heal it. More researchers suggest that clinicians should try using cultural inclusion and/or cultural reconnection while treating intergenerational trauma, as it could be a key aspect of healing this type of trauma.

Future Directions:

Intergenerational trauma is still a very under-researched area. Future research could involve conducting replicability and/or extension studies of current research to provide support for the reliability of past research. This would involve testing measurement tools created and testing the treatment methods suggested. Future research could also focus on other potential effects of intergenerational trauma, including potential biological or neurological impacts, and potential links to other types of abuse.

Abbreviated References

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people and departments for their help on this project: UND's psychology department, my research mentor Dr. McDonald, the Ronald E. McNair program, Kelly Kennedy, and UND's Chester Fritz Library's online database access.