

## **A psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic perspective on the transgenerational trauma of Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples.**

The members of our organisation are highly trained clinicians in the area of mental health. Psychoanalysis assumes humans to be constituted as social beings in a primary and continuing interdependency with others (Rustin, M. 1991) and with their social, cultural and spiritual environments. Our experience and our knowledge of current research make clear that certain events can be traumatising to individuals, families and communities, and that those who experience such events will most likely be dealing with the consequences for the rest of their lives, as well as having an effect on subsequent generations. Such events constitute transgenerational trauma.

The PPAA accepts that the historical, cultural, social and political realities of people must be acknowledged as a latent area in the therapeutic field; and if not recognized, pathology resulting from trauma may be the continuing legacy, and wounding pain maybe denied (Nathan, 2017).

Aboriginal people have experienced multiple losses associated with colonisation and its legacies which continue into the present. This legacy is reflected in such realities as the high rates of emotional distress, suicidality, violence, incarceration and more.

In referring to these losses Jonathan Lear (2007, 295) writing about the American Indians, but with views equally pertinent to Aboriginal people, said: “Aboriginal people have experienced firstly a loss or mutilation of concepts; that is, the central concepts by which they understood their lives have now become unintelligible as ways of living, for example, freely going on a hunt. Secondly, they have experienced the loss of traditional rituals and ceremonies in the meeting of the old with the new. Thirdly, they have suffered a loss of mental states such as courage and confidence, which were manifest in hunting or ceremonial life and, finally, they have lost the sense of identity and being associated with the traditional roles such as hunter or gatherer” (cited in Nathan, 2013).

As psychoanalytic psychotherapists we are especially aware of the *terrible price to be paid for renouncing the recognition of another person*. As Pamela Nathan, the Director of the CASSE Aboriginal Australian Relations Program writes in “Recognition: A matter of life and death in Aboriginal Australia” (2015): “Recognition is as essential to life as oxygen. For an individual who receives no positive recognition it heralds psychic and emotional death. Psychic death involves the denial of oneself as a human being. The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison exposes the worse atrocity of slavery, the real horror, is not physical death but psychical death. A community or society that receives no positive recognition heralds a communal psychic death and equates to a denial of freedom....A lack of recognition heralds a ‘nobody’s’ landstate of Terra Nullius—and a

nobody state of mind becomes sovereign. Recognition is about validation and being. Recognition is only possible in a peopled land of equal and different relationships—a land belonging to and populated by people. A world without recognition spells death to humanity and to life itself....(Nathan, 2015, 4) ....Recognition does cut to the heart of what an individual needs to have a sound *mind- let alone the well-being of our national psyche. To treat the mind we need to address issues of recognition at a personal and individual level. Then healing can come. To treat our national psyche we need cultural and constitutional recognition. (Nathan, 2015, 26).*

Australian Aboriginal and First Nation peoples have experienced such losses, with profound consequences for their social and emotional health and wellbeing.

Perhaps the most catastrophic act of non-recognition, in terms of the destruction of culture, language, history and connection to land, was what is now referred to as the ‘Stolen Generations’. From the beginning of white settlement in Australia, Aboriginal children were forcibly separated from their communities. Most critically, stolen from them was not just their family but their culture, language and connection to country – their very identity (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016), sense of meaning and purpose. The devastating impacts of the Stolen Generations were multi-faceted with trauma built on top of trauma.

The high rates of suicide, psychological distress and mental illness experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people is well documented. The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescent and youth health and wellbeing report* (2018) identified that:

- most adolescents have low to moderate levels of psychological distress;
- most Indigenous people (67%) aged 15–24 reported low to moderate levels of psychological distress, while a considerable proportion (33%) reported high to very high levels of psychological distress; and
- a higher proportion of males (75%) than females (59%) experienced low or moderate levels of psychological distress.

**The PPAA commits to working within the frameworks that have been established around aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing and mental health through extensive consultation with Aboriginal people, and therefore supports the following principles in relation to Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples<sup>1</sup>:**

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<sup>1</sup> As outlined in Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People’s Alliance. (July, 2019). *Submission into the Royal Commission into Mental Health*; Nathan, P. (2015). *Recognition: A matter*

- Reconciliation and recognition
- Self-determination
- Equality
- Empowerment
- Reciprocity and mutual respect
- Privileging the effects of transgenerational trauma
- Privileging the racial context and post-colonial legacies
- Privileging cultural revival
- Privileging cultural healing
- Intercultural engagement
- Privileging traditional custodianship of ancestral lands.

The PPAA Code of Ethics, in Clause 5.1 states that, “Members/trainees shall respect the essential humanity and dignity of patients and promote their well- being.”

In the PPAA Guidelines for Code of Ethics for Member Associations, Clause 1.2 Psychotherapists shall not discriminate against nor exploit their patients on grounds of age, gender, race, cultural background, sexual orientation, social class, political affiliation and religion, nor impose their own values (for example social, spiritual, political and ideological).

The PPAA Code of Ethics, in Clause 1.8.1, states that “the PPAA and Member Associations faced with situations which exceed the level of their competence, experience or the internal resources available, shall seek professional advice or assistance from appropriate collegial bodies such as the PPAA and/or other qualified sources.”

The PPAA Code of Ethics, in Clause 5.7 states that “Members/trainees have an obligation to continue to develop and maintain their professional knowledge, competence and personal well-being.”

Thus, in this instance, in relation to Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples:

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of life and death in Aboriginal Australia, CASSE; and Westerman, T.G. (2010). Engaging Australian Aboriginal Youth in mental health services. *Australian Psychologist*, 45, 3, 212-222

- The PPAA highly recommends that its members, when working with Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples, participate in appropriate cultural training as an essential part of ethical practice.
- The PPAA invites all its members to take in-service training workshops on the transgenerational trauma of Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples.
- The PPAA highly recommends that its members, when working with Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples, recognise the transgenerational trauma they have sustained.
- The PPAA highly recommends that its members, when working with Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples, hold in mind that the diagnosis/es may be culture-bound and that treatment needs to hold cultural protocols, norms and beliefs in mind.

### **Recommended reading:**

Australian Human Rights Commission (2016), 'Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families' (1996). Australian Human Rights Commission. Viewed 14 March 2016, <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/projects/bringing-them-home>>

Lear, J, (2007). "Working Through the End of Civilisation". *Int J Psychoanalysis* 88, pp. 291–308.

Nathan, P. (2015). *Recognition: A matter of life and death in Aboriginal Australia*, CASSE.

Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance. (July, 2019) *Submission into the Royal Commission into Mental Health*.

<https://www.vaccho.org.au/assets/01-RESOURCES/TOPIC-AREA/VACYPA/2019/VACYPA-ROYAL-COMMISSION-MENTAL-HEALTH.pdf>

Westerman, T.G. (2010) Engaging Australian Aboriginal Youth in Mental Health Services. *Australian Psychologist*, 45, 3, 212-222.

Anne Jeffs (Member of the PPAA Public Issues Committee) and Pamela Nathan (CASSE; VAPP) have developed this document for the PPAA. We gratefully acknowledge the input of Donna Jacobs (NSWIPP) to earlier versions of this paper.