Guest editorial: Trauma transported; trauma transformed

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This Special Issue of the *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia* (PACJA) focuses on working with trauma. The articles in this Special Issue cover an impressive array of topics, from working with trauma in different populations (e.g., trans and gender diverse people, people involved in BDSM/kink, correctional services employees), to healing trauma using specific approaches (e.g., focusing-oriented experiential therapy, Tuning Relationships with Music™). These articles highlight the breadth of trauma-work in contemporary psychotherapy and counselling.

I was asked to write this guest editorial because, in an Australian Special Issue on working with trauma, there was a conspicuous absence of focus on the trauma experienced by First Nations Australians. When we speak of trauma in this country, we must be inclusive of the generational, collective, and complex trauma in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Symptoms testify that history is not past—the traumatic impacts of colonisation continue across generations.

There is an intimate connection between the traumas we experience and the stories we tell. As Mehil-Madrona (2010) observed,

We live storied lives. We organise experience into stories as we share life interactively with others. The plot, characters, and morals of the stories we hear influence our synaptic connections, they change our brains. Stories also live through us. We are born into stories, those of our families, nations, religions and cultures. (p. 180)

Yet what if the stories we tell are trauma stories, lived experiences transported from the prison hulks, across generations? The question then must be: How do we transform those trauma stories into healing action?

My invitation for PACJA readers is to consider how we can build healing responses to the pain of communal, social, and cultural trauma in the lives of First Nations Australians. Stories can help us make sense of the senseless in what is being experienced by some Aboriginal children today in child removals, the presence of so many young people in juvenile detention centres, and the high incarceration rates of women and men in prison. Stories testify to the failure of the colonial system to attend to its own pathological

functioning. Stories will allow us to circle into truth that explains the pain and disorder of lives today, and stories can provide a healing way forward as we reclaim our cultural and spiritual identities in showing what works in healing trauma.

Trauma transported

Trauma is a complex mixture of psychological, physiological, and social responses to highly stressful experiences, which overwhelms individuals' or a groups' abilities to cope. Traumatic events happen to all people at all ages and across all socio-economic strata in our societies. These events may cause terror, intense fear, horror, helplessness, and physical stress reactions. The impact of such events does not simply go away when they are over. Instead, traumatic events are profound experiences that change the way people see and experience themselves and the worlds in which they live.

While the often-debilitating signs and symptoms of individual trauma are widely written about, less attention is paid to the collective traumas that are disproportionately experienced by First Nations peoples. In work with First Nations peoples, Ratanvale (2007, as cited in Krieg, 2009) proposes a series of signs and symptoms common to collective trauma: deep mistrust of self and others, even within family; self-directed violence, suicide, and risk-taking behaviour; substance misuse; violence against women; unremitting grief; shame and humiliation; intergenerational conflict; role diffusion, including sexual abuse and other boundary violations; cultural genocide, the loss of traditional values, and the desecration of land and institutions; leadership crisis; and a conspiracy of silence, or overall attitude of secrecy. This list of signs and symptoms is consistent with the experience of many First Nations communities, suggesting that the concept of collective trauma is relevant to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It differs from the individualistic nature of post-traumatic stress disorder and requires an approach with collective and community components.

Blagg (2000) suggests that the "notion of intergenerational trauma or 'trauma lines' is useful in describing the cultural transmission of destructive patterns of behaviour" (p. 6), where the violence coming into a family is internalised and transmitted across and through future generations. This process of transmission does not just occur from the past to the present. It also flows from the present to the future. People may have fight-flight-freeze responses to uncontrollable and repeated stressors, resulting in chronic over-activation of their autonomic nervous systems. They become sick in mind, body, soul, and spirit.

Trauma Transformed: Integrated Healing

The effects of unresolved loss, grief, victimisation, and layered traumatisation on First Nations people—termed "generational," "intergenerational," or "multigenerational" grief—requires a culturally-informed trauma-integrated workforce. There is an urgent need for training and accreditation of Indigenous practitioners and educators who can work with cultural healing tools.

Some important developments in this regard are worth mentioning. The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) recently established the College of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Practices (CATSIHP). Between July and October 2019, a set of six PACFA webinars, initiated by Kate Griggs in support the establishment of CATSIHP, were delivered:

- Introducing Indigenous representation into PACFA: A conversation;
- Understanding the AQF [Australian Qualifications Framework], Indigenous critical pedagogy and healing practices;
- We Al-li: Presenting culturally informed trauma integrated Indigenous healing approaches;
- Indigenous Psychotherapy in Aotearoa through *Waka Oranga*;
- Truth Telling in an Indigenous Community; and,
- Developing multicultural competencies: Experiences from Canadian, Mexican and Australian Indigenous communities

This webinar series was designed to create conversations around Indigenous psychotherapy and counselling, and to ensure that programs in Indigenous critical pedagogy and healing practices would be developed, accessible, and accredited.

Two of the PACFA webinar presenters referred to *Dadirri* as a powerful research method and a healing process in response to trauma. Dadirri is an ancient Indigenous tradition of mindfulness; a practice of deep listening and quiet awareness. During my PhD, Dadirri was the essential tool I found in my need to listen, hear, and learn from the stories of the people: people who had lived their lives under government policies and controls over the Australia's colonial history; people who knew their communities, knew the problems, and wanted something to happen; and, people who were willing to work together to make something happen. Healing happens in relationships and with intent. It takes time. In listening, I also learnt responsibility, to reflect and think before coming to a deeper understanding, which enables me to choose to advocate and act. While the work of my PhD resulted in a thesis, it was the communal activities within the fieldwork of my studies which resulted in the richness that kept me on my path.

Later, I was involved in establishing We Al-li, an organisation that offers culturally informed, trauma-integrated training for individuals, families, communities, and organisation. The term "we al-li" comes from the language of the Woppaburra people of Central Queensland: "we" means fire, and "al-li" means water. These are essential elements for all life. Fire and water—anger and grief: two deep emotions I found present in all with whom I was working. In the *educaring* approach of We Al-li, we mapped six steps or stages for healing trauma:

- Creating culturally safe places (e.g., massage, safe touch);
- Finding and telling our stories (e.g., play, dance, theatre);
- Making sense of our stories (e.g., music, theatre, writing, art);
- Feeling feelings (e.g., play, theatre, mindfulness, nature);
- Moving through layers of loss and grief to acceptance; and,

- Strengthening cultural and spiritual identities.

We called the activities of We Al-li *storywork*: sitting together, sharing and mapping stories, teaching each other, not just of pain and disorder, but of resilience and creativity, and using deep cultural processes in what worked when people made the choice to do something about their lives and change their own circumstances. The activities were communal, and the healing was communal. The stories that some might call trauma stories, held in the mind body soul spirit, were shared in conversations, sung in songs, painted, danced, and presented in theatre. They became ceremonies of change and healing essential for building a post-colonial future. We also saw the revitalisation of communities of care, and the beginning transformation of communities of practice.

In an address to the Australian nation on the 26th of January 1988, Miriam Rose Ungunemerr Baumann said Dadirri—listening to one another—was the greatest gift Aboriginal people can give to their fellow Australians. She reminded us that only by listening and learning together will we be able to transform the trauma, transported on the prison hulks, into healing action. We are our children's future.

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