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## **Cultural Work in Addressing Conflicts and Violence in Traumatized Communities**

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*There is a growing appreciation that conflict and violence in many communities have their origins in a history of traumatic experiences. Why this link exists and how it comes about is still unclear. We have no unified psychology of traumatized communities, and little is known about how to address these traumatic origins collectively in these communities. This article proposes a psychodynamic model of collective trauma and a psychoanalytically informed approach to working with traumatized communities to address their issues of conflict and violence. It highlights the impact of collective trauma on the culture of a community, which is its collective mind. While the proposed model and approach have been informed by work with individuals and communities traumatized in a range of circumstances, this article focuses on the author's experience with Aboriginals of the Central Deserts of Australia, highlighting the trauma of cultural dispossession and a model of cultural work to address that trauma.*

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**I**t is commonly observed that conflict and violence are rife, and sometimes intractable, in traumatized communities. Some have (erroneously) attributed this conflict and violence to certain characteristics of these communities and their people—such as their being prone to aggression—or have suggested that these problems are an understandable extension of longstanding disharmony and tension.<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, a growing appreciation that the conflict and violence in many communities originates in their history of traumatic experiences.<sup>2</sup> Why this link exists and how it comes about is still unclear. We have no unified psychology of traumatized communities, and little is known about how to address these traumatic origins collectively in these communities. This article, based largely on a presentation at the Annual Scientific Conference of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, University of Oxford, in September 2018, proposes a psychodynamic model of collective trauma and a psychoanalytically informed approach to working with traumatized communities to address their problem with conflict and violence. It highlights the impact of collective trauma on the culture of a community, which is its collective mind.

The theoretical formulation of this *psychology of collective trauma* is informed by work with various traumatized communities over many years. This article, however, is based solely on my experience working with Central Deserts Aboriginals of Australia because their trauma and the work to address it demonstrate relevant cultural factors and because these relatively small and well-defined desert communities allow for observations of collective behavior and group psychology. Furthermore, the original presentation was based on work with First Nations People.

My intention here is not academic; rather, it is underpinned by a genuine wish to formulate some tangible understanding that may be shared and used by other Aboriginal communities in Australia and in other parts of the world. Some of the understanding gained here will be relevant to other traumatized communities affected by natural disasters and war.

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## **Background and Context**

I am writing from the perspective of a psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist who has worked with traumatized individuals, and collectives, for the past twenty years. For much of that time, I was also the director of the Dax Centre, a unique organization dedicated to the promotion of mental health through art and creativity. One of the aims of that organization was to address the stigma of mental illness. My work there gave rise to my interest in the dynamics of societal attitudes, especially the problems of prejudice and fear, which underpin stigma. As director, I had the opportunity to work with different traumatized communities, such as a “community” of survivors of childhood sexual abuse, survivors of the Holocaust, and those affected by natural disasters such as bush fires and the tsunami in eastern Japan in 2011. I also gained a deep appreciation of the ways in which art and culture can contribute to population health.

My interest in “very large group” or “population” psychology led me to join a Melbourne-based group of psychotherapists in establishing CASSE, an organization dedicated to assisting schools and communities to create a safe, supportive environment, employing psychodynamic principles. As a member of CASSE, I came to work with some Aboriginal communities in the Central Desert. Eight years ago, a major Aboriginal organization in Alice Springs invited my colleagues and me to help them understand what was happening in their communities that had led to a dramatic escalation of conflict and violence.

After a couple of years, I moved on to work in three Central Desert communities that were already receiving indispensable support from non-Aboriginal professionals who had lived and worked in the communities for many years. Again applying psychodynamic principles, we increased the use of art as a way of understanding and healing collective trauma. The embedded professionals guided me through minefields of cultural nuance and sensitivity, and it is important to emphasize that without their advice and assistance, my work would not have been possible. The positive changes that occurred within these three groups can be attributed to a process through which the Aboriginal people themselves had begun, with the assistance and support of the embedded professionals, to start spinning the wheel of change. My role, in flying in and out over a few days at several months’ interval, was more as an outsider than an expert, providing a different perspective, making minor adjustments, and helping the professionals and the Aboriginals see what might be obstructing their efforts. Most important, the persistence of the Aboriginals themselves and their embedded non-Aboriginal supporters kept the wheel spinning in the months between my visits and accounts for the incremental gains.

At this point, I wish to clarify that I use the term “Aboriginal” because it is how the people I have been working with in the Central Desert refer to themselves. Many in the cities prefer the term “Indigenous,” and those who are more politically aware refer to themselves as “First Nations people.” Most, however, wish to be referred to by the name of their people; for example, those in Melbourne, where I live, call themselves “Koorie.”

To maintain their privacy, I have not named the groups of people I worked with by their locality, language, or ethnicity. I wish to emphasize, however, that these facets of identity are important to them. And while they gave me permission to write, the people I worked with also expressed a strong wish that they not be identified, to avoid the risk of shame by exposing the problems they are experiencing.

Finally, in my consideration of contextual issues are the ethical and psychodynamic factors that have influenced how I work with these communities. The people I have been working with are some of the most traumatized and disempowered people in Australia. I have

tried to be careful not to disempower them inadvertently, even here, in the writing of this article.

In working with traumatized communities, I am mindful that I am an outsider and that therefore the risk of intrusion is ever present, even when people have invited me into their community. I do not claim expertise; rather, I take the attitude that I am “ignorant but interested.” I am careful about cultural sensitivity and any vulnerabilities from traumatized states. (Despite such care, I have tripped many times.) Finally, I give attention to the creation of an emotionally and culturally safe space, which means I value and respect participants’ emotions and culture. From the perspective of the Aboriginals, our relationship was simply about trust, and they spoke of how I was there to help them talk about those things that are “too sad, too angry, too painful, too shameful to talk about.”

## **The Australian Aboriginal**

It is strange to speak of the “Australian Aboriginal” because these people existed long before their country was named “Australia” by its colonizers. Their “country” was not a country as such but consisted of some 250 nations, each with its own territory, language, and culture. Recent DNA studies have found Australian Aboriginals were part of the first wave of migration from Africa seventy-two thousand years ago and became a distinct group fifty-eight thousand years ago, whereas Europeans and Asians became distinct twenty thousand years later. The study suggests that the Australian Aboriginals are the oldest defined ethnic group in the world.<sup>3</sup>

It is estimated that before British colonization in 1788, Aboriginals numbered up to a million. In the 2016 census, 650,000 people identify themselves as Aboriginals and Torres Straits Islanders, making up 2.8 percent of the total Australian population. There are now fewer than two hundred language groups. About 75 percent of these native people live in the cities or regional towns and 25 percent in remote areas. Their life expectancy is at least ten years less than that of the general population.

The Australian Aboriginals were once nomadic farmers with strong sociocultural structures and processes. They possess the world’s oldest continuous living culture, which has been passed down through oral history for two thousand generations and signified through the elements of the natural world: land (their country) and living forms. They narrate their culture through tjukurpa (dreamtime stories), inma (songs and song lines), and art (from rock art to contemporary art), holding central their law, which defines their place in the natural world and governs the order of relationships among themselves and with others. It is expressed through an elaborate kinship system, practiced customs, rituals and ceremonies, and everyday language.

Colonized, and being dispossessed of their land, they were herded into “protective camps or settlements” or church-run “missions.”<sup>4</sup> Their sense of being, identity, and order, as with so much of their law and culture, was signified through their natural world, their land. Without access to their land, which they rightly called “their country,” they lost their system of signification and symbolization, essentially, their way of making sense. This is the basis of their trauma, what I call “cultural trauma.”

It is difficult to fathom the nature and depth of the trauma the Aboriginals experience. It is complex and massive.<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, that until 1967 they were not counted in the census; before that, the Australian Aborigines were classified under the category of “flora and fauna.” It is difficult to imagine the subjective experience of being treated interpersonally, and as a matter of government policy, as nonhuman. Then, for over a hundred years, until the 1970s, it was also government policy to systematically remove

Aboriginal children that were conceived with non-Aboriginals and placed in institutions where many were abused. They are known as the Stolen Generations.<sup>6</sup> Discrimination and disempowerment that can be listed as chronic, persisting, and cumulative trauma continues.<sup>7</sup> Before I discuss further the complexities of Aboriginal trauma, it would be useful to define “trauma” and list some of the core characteristics of its psychology.

## **Definition of Trauma**

The word “trauma” comes from the Greek *trauma*, which means wound. In medicine, we speak of trauma as a physical injury causing damage to the body. In psychology, we think of it as an injury to the mind. How does such an injury manifest? Biological psychiatrists conceptualize it in terms of a disruption to the equilibrium of the chemical milieu in the brain, which gives rise to the symptoms of flashbacks and hyper-arousal that occur in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I would like to suggest a broader concept of trauma that is consistent with proposals to widen its definition beyond the single-event medical, American-Eurocentric model.<sup>8</sup> This definition focuses not on the event or the injury but on the impact of trauma: Trauma is the process through which the capacity of a system to make sense of an experience is overwhelmed; the system is rendered frozen, or paralyzed, with regard to that particular, and other related, experiences.

In the individual, trauma causes the mind to become shocked and initially incapacitated; if the traumatic experience is not worked through or “processed,” it leads to a shutting down of a small part of the mind. When the trauma is cumulative, a greater part of the mind becomes affected, and eventually the whole mind could be overwhelmed, a situation that, if severe, would be called a “mental breakdown.”

In a collective, whether a group or a community, the mind is referred to as the group mind. It is also sometimes called the social or shared conscious and unconscious. I prefer, however, a term that most can relate to in everyday language, “culture.” When trauma affects the mind of a collective, which is its culture, we can refer to it as “cultural trauma.” I elaborate on this concept in a later section.

## **Psychology of Trauma**

When trauma is experienced by the mind as an injury it must be contained and isolated; in terms of depth psychology/psychoanalysis, it is a process called *encapsulation*.<sup>9</sup> It is as if the experience must be wrapped up and packed away in a capsule, removed from consciousness. If this process is successful, the mind has no further awareness or memory of it, until that encapsulation is broken.

The second maneuver the mind makes to protect itself from the trauma is to remove all emotion from the overwhelming experience. A certain emotional detachment, or numbness, in the aftermath of a traumatic experience is common. This phenomenon is different from the shock that occurs immediately after an incident. The initial shock usually subsides over a few days, but this numbness and sense of detachment from the environment and from oneself can extend for a long time, weeks to months. In some instances, as has been reported in war veterans, it can persist for years, and, possibly, for the rest of one’s life.

These long periods of emotional detachment, however, are often punctuated by overwhelming episodic emotional eruptions, usually in the form of outbursts of anger and violence. These periods are like the initial receding of the sea from the coast just before the tsunami. When emotional detachment in individuals is punctuated by flashbacks and

overwhelming emotions, psychiatrists are inclined to label it PTSD. In large collectives, this emotional detachment might present itself as an eerie silence or a sense of lifelessness in a community; it might correspond to the systematic cold inhumanity that precedes the wild unleashing of violence and genocide.

If the encapsulation and emotional detachment fail to contain the trauma, the mind may regress in order to protect itself. I define “regression” as retreating and regrouping. It is a psychological concept that, most unfortunately, borrows from the language of war.

In retreating to a developmentally earlier, “more basic” level of functioning, the mind is said to function more economically, attending only to the basic necessities required to survive. In the regressed individual, the person appears, behaves, and thinks as a younger version of himself or herself. In regressed large collectives, the people return to a particular pattern of group functioning; for example, increased (blind) dependency on their leaders.<sup>10</sup>

There are different levels or depths of regression. When we are ill with a cold we might regress a little in wishing for soft food, preferably the soup that our mothers used to cook for us when we were young. When individuals are severely traumatized, they might regress to such a depth that they cannot speak but just huddle in a corner, rocking themselves to sleep.

In my work with traumatized individuals and communities, I have been able to identify four stages of regression.

First, there is a *compromised ability to think*; individuals and groups are unable to consider complex situations. They exhibit an increased degree and frequency of impulsivity (action without reflection) and reactivity and a corresponding increased tendency to *simplistic binary thinking*. Everything is either/or: black or white, all or nothing, good or bad. There are no gray zones; there is no third possibility. This kind of thinking occurred in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States when President George W. Bush said, “If you are not for us, you are against us.” This statement offers no third possibility: neutrality. In a community, the existence of collective binary thinking might manifest itself as polarized opinions and extremist ideas with very little coming from the middle ground where commonalities and complexities of situations might be considered.

Second, *boundaries and identity are fragile*, and usually frantic attempts are made to reinforce them. Vamik Volkan noted in traumatized societies, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, a strong preoccupation with strengthening their border and their identity by reawakening a chosen past (nationalistic) trauma/symbol.<sup>11</sup> One wonders whether Northern Ireland’s Protestant Orange Order’s need to stage territorial parades and display banners and flags was a similar attempt to shore up a fragile boundary and identity. The most obvious recent examples are the phenomena of Brexit and President Donald Trump’s wall.

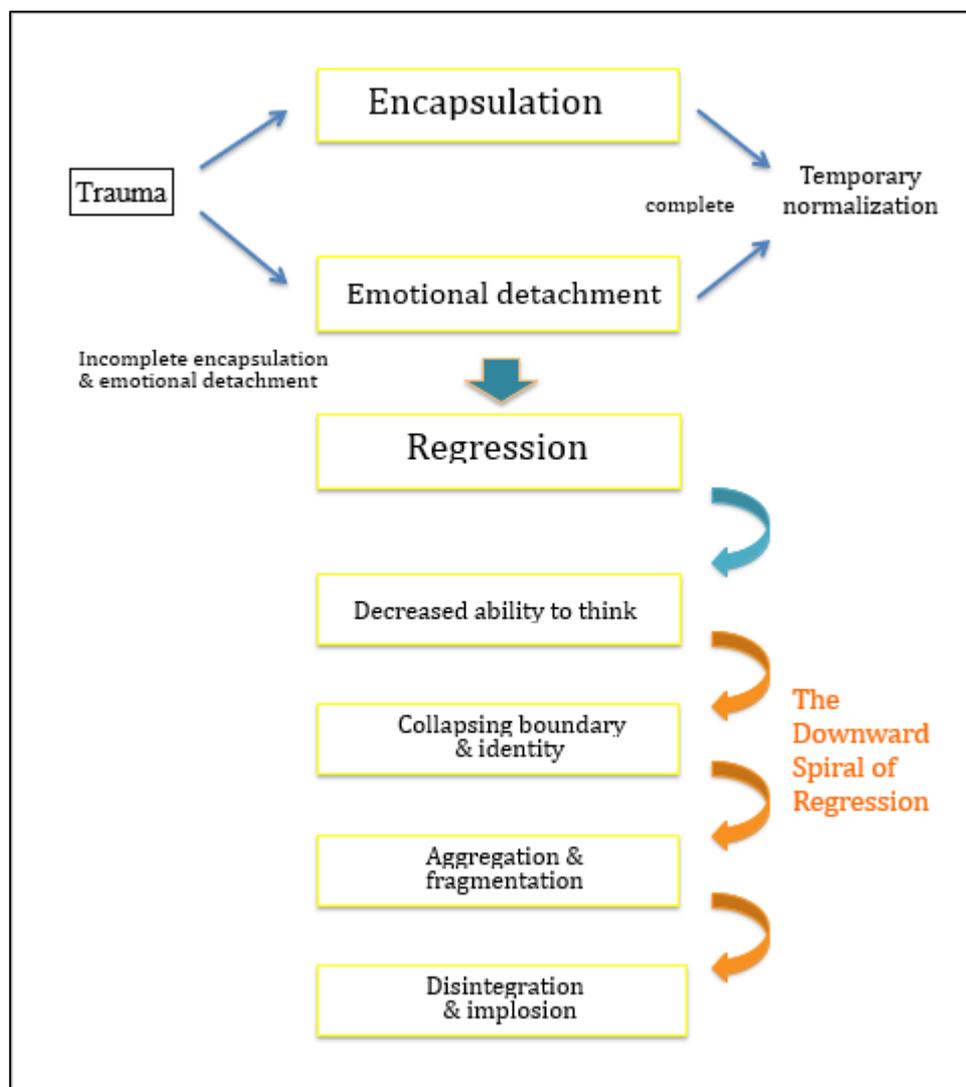
If the shoring up of identity and boundary fails, *aggregation and fragmentation* will occur. This third stage is a phenomenon frequently observed in natural disasters. Some members of a community that have survived a disaster become closer than they were before the traumatic event (aggregation), but many become more isolated from each other.<sup>12</sup> In Aboriginal communities affected by conflict and violence, some families become closer but many individuals find themselves isolated and alone. The overall effect is one of fragmentation. In a fragmented community, the number of splinter groups increases, and, accordingly, collective decision-making becomes more difficult. Conflict breaks out between splinter groups. The more optimistic might suggest that the phenomenon of aggregation and fragmentation represents the final effort or attempt by the collective mind to organize itself in order to survive. Those more pessimistic consider this state of mind a mere transition to the next inevitable state of disintegration and implosion.

The fourth stage, *disintegration and implosion* in a collective, is akin to a complete breakdown in an individual. It is striking that a community in this state is no longer

concerned about identity and boundary but very anxious about the possibility of extinction. Their concern is no longer Who are we? but Will we exist?

In these communities, individuals become increasingly isolated, with diminishing group formation. In this situation, it is often difficult to assemble a “community meeting.” Traumatized Aboriginal communities are reluctant to come together, and even among those who emphasize the importance of kinship relationships and the mutuality of obligations, one can begin to see conflict and breakdown in the extended family unit. Episodes of random, unpredictable conflict and violence occur within the community, along with sporadic, but increasingly frequent, breaches of boundaries. Dramatic examples of such collapses of boundary include the invasion of homes and private gatherings.

Figure 1. A Typology of Trauma



## **Cultural Trauma**

From a broad perspective, the Aboriginal trauma is a cultural trauma. This term, “cultural trauma,” is often used synonymously with collective trauma. But cultural trauma is different

from collective trauma. The trauma of the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States, for example, was shared and experienced collectively. While many who were directly affected were Americans, there were many who came from other cultures. In cultural trauma, the shared culture itself is damaged.

Kai Erikson, in his landmark study of a community damaged by a natural disaster, notes that the community would survive as long as “its tissue” was not broken.<sup>13</sup> I suspect he had in mind the human body, where the connective tissue, made up predominantly of collagen, holds the specialized cells together to form an organ. He did not, however, define the term “tissue of a community.”

I have proposed in several publications on the psychoanalytic concept of community that the tissue of a community is its culture.<sup>14</sup> If we were to take Cicero’s lead on the Latin root of the word “culture,” *cultura*, which suggests an agricultural metaphor, we might say that culture is akin to the soil that holds and nourishes us.<sup>15</sup> I have suggested elsewhere that it is useful to distinguish cultural products, such as the arts and culinary life, from cultural processes, such as language, customs, and rituals, and cultural structures, such as religion and law.

The least apparent of all is what I call the “cultural substrates.” This “invisible” part of culture exists in the substrata and operates most insidiously. It is generally not noticeable and rarely considered or questioned, yet it influences our thinking and actions from one moment to the next without our being aware of it. We come to realize that it is there when we move from one culture to another. We usually become anxious when we find ourselves in another culture; we become aware that there is something unspoken and unidentifiable that is influencing the local people’s behavior and sense of being to which we are not privy. We feel out of place and become acutely aware that we are foreigners. For the local people, that something is holding them, guiding them, like the water that holds the fish buoyant, and the fish glides seamlessly in it.

In the cultural substrates/substrata, we find the pool of meta-signifiers, which are the precursors of language; we find the unformed thoughts waiting to be turned into thinkable ideas; and we find experiences that have yet to be made sense of or named. They are waiting for cultural processes and structures to transform them into recognizable symbols; ones that are agreed on collectively and become a medium for communication. Cultural substrates are important because they are the raw materials that we have to work with when we attempt to make sense of an experience. An impoverished culture has very little in its substrata, and the people of that culture struggle to make sense of their collective experience.

Returning to the cultural trauma of the Aboriginals, we see that they have been deprived of the cultural substrates that are grounded in their relationship with and experience of their land/country and their natural world. They also have been dispossessed of their cultural processes, such as rituals, customs, and law. For example, they have been forced into reserves and settlements with other tribes or language groups and thus prevented from carrying out their elaborate system of kinship and understanding of the order of their natural world. With regard to cultural structure, their law has been trumped by the “white man’s law” and considered by their younger generations to be increasingly irrelevant. In essence, their culture has been damaged by colonization.

Many Australian Aboriginals feel they have become “foreigners” and homeless people in their own land. Culturally dispossessed, they are constantly anxious as they struggle to cling to their traditional culture while also struggling to adapt to the modern culture. Aboriginals by the coast have had two hundred years to adapt, but most of the Central Desert Aboriginals (with whom I work) have encountered Western culture only in the past fifty years, that is, in only the present and the preceding generation. Some still recall the time of living a nomadic

life in the desert without need of clothing. For them, the introduction of Western culture is very recent, and they are struggling to adapt to catastrophic changes in a short time.

One might say that the cultural trauma of these Aboriginals is “fresh” and that their experience highlights the mechanisms of cultural trauma and how it affects individuals and communities. A large part of the work I discuss here involves my efforts to address this cultural trauma that I call “cultural work.” I illustrate some aspects of this work with three different groups of Aboriginals in the Central Desert.

## **Working with Three Groups of Central Desert Aboriginals**

### **Intergenerational Storytelling through Art**

The first group I worked with was a community of about three hundred, located about three hours’ drive from Alice Springs, the main town center in the Central Desert. The mediating person who invited my team into the community was the manager of the community art center. Most communities in the desert with a population about the size of this community have an art center, which is essentially a large art studio where members of a community come to paint in acrylics on canvas for a small income. These colorful symbolic depictions of country and culture are highly sought in the commercial art world, in Australia and around the world. In the 1990s, the Australian government funded the establishment of these art centers across the desert to encourage financial self-sufficiency.

The Aboriginal women who met with my team were senior artists; many were recognized leaders of their community, most were grandmothers. Although they were interested in meeting with us to discuss healing for their community, they were uncertain about how art might assist in the process. A few years earlier, an Aboriginal leader told me in Alice Springs, “No one is going paint anything unless you pay them.” Yet, referring to a time in the past when the Central Desert Aboriginals made marks on the ground to tell stories to their young, another elder told me, “Everyone painted then to tell stories.” Now, in another casualty of colonization, their art making had been appropriated for commercial purposes—making colorful art that white people like.

The women artists looked at me with bewilderment when I suggested that painting their sadness could help them heal from their loss and grief. One said, “No one wants to buy sad paintings.” Another said there was no sadness but “a lot of worries,” “worry about young people”; “they don’t know culture.” There had been high rates of petrol sniffing and suicide among the young. An elder recounted anxiously that the present generation no longer listened to the older generation, which was therefore unable pass on their culture (which had been passed on through at least two thousand generations).

One member of our team prompted me to tell the women about our work with the Jewish community in Melbourne. This was a project that began with several survivors of the Holocaust painting their experience. When a few artists from the second generation heard about the project, they expressed their wish to paint their own experience. When the artworks from both generations were exhibited together, one generation came to see and understand the experience of the other. The exhibition also attracted the attention of a third generation of survivors.

A few of the women promptly said to each other, “We must do the same. We will paint to tell the young people what we are worried about.” While we broke for lunch, a group of young men and women came into the art center expressing their wish to paint their stories too. Over the ensuing months, members of that community from three generations painted their stories in groups: grandmothers, daughters, and granddaughters; sons and grandsons. For several reasons—beyond the scope of this article to go into—the grandfathers/male

elders did not participate. In a few instances, more than one generation painted together, telling their stories to each other while they worked.

When we returned months later, the artists were all eager to tell their stories to us. The large canvases, measuring approximately one meter by two meters, depicted not only what they were worried about but also their sadness. Among the paintings were symbolic portrayals of loss, grief, and death. One group of women, pointing to curved lines across a canvas, spoke of the “wind of sadness.” The atmosphere in the art center when we arrived had been palpably sad, yet after the women talked about the completed artworks, we felt a sense of life, even excitement. The women said they wanted to share the experience of “telling their stories” at the annual Desert Mob gathering in Alice Springs.

Every year for the past ten years, artists from more than fifty communities across the desert have gathered in Alice Springs for several days to show their work and share their experiences. At a symposium with more than two hundred participants, the women spoke about telling stories to each other with their art. They spoke courageously; some wept as they told their stories of loss and grief. Some in the audience also wept. A few called out that these were their stories too, stories of being taken away from their families by the government.

### **Moving from Emotional Work to Cultural Work**

After the symposium, several Aboriginal women in the audience came up to me to ask whether I could help them with similar projects for their community. I accepted the invitation from an organization representing a group of women elders from eighteen communities.

The group of about twenty women elders asked me to explain trauma and how they might heal from it. My description of trauma seemed to resonate with them as they related it to the problems of conflict and violence in their communities. I also explained to them the effect of cultural trauma. They were relieved to learn that their predicament was something that had happened to them and was not due totally to failings in themselves. But as they spoke more about the situation in their communities, especially the devastation from premature deaths resulting from illness, suicide, and violence, they became more restless, and some left the meeting. Others appeared numb and emotionally detached. In general, I saw little in the way of emotional expression. Throughout the first couple of workshops, the women were subdued, their soft and monotonous voices reflecting the general mood.

I encouraged the women to paint what was on their mind. During the first workshop they painted their country in only symbolic forms. But during the second workshop a couple of months later, they painted their concerns about conflict and violence. Most women painted their community’s problems. A few, however, depicted the problem of family breakdown, though only in general terms. At the third workshop, a few women painted stories of their own experiences of conflict, violence, and loss.

Halfway through that third workshop, an elder stood up and spoke for a couple of minutes with a strong and emotion-laden voice, in her own language. I responded by telling her that even though I could not understand what she had said, I had a strong sense that what she had said was very important, and I asked whether she would be willing to repeat it and to allow the interpreter to translate every word she said. She repeated, “Sisters, we had a beautiful country until the white people came and took it away. We lost our land, we lost our bush tucker, we lost our culture.” Later, another elder spoke of the community’s need to move on from their loss and to “build a new culture.” “But,” she added, “we can’t do it by ourselves; we need white people to help, white people we can trust.”

The group began to feel more confident and asked to paint large works in groups. One group depicted the destruction of their country by the atomic-bomb testing in the 1950s and

expressed anger that the government had still to admit fault. Another group painted spears, shields, boomerangs, and other symbols of their culture. The third group painted a tjukurrpa of how a community responded to two orphaned children: the children, who had been rejected, would come into the community at night and cause trouble; the problems continued until the elders decided that it was wrong to reject the children and asked everyone to care for them and bring them back into the community.

The group of women elders appeared surprised at my interest in their tjukurrpa and how these stories might help them with the problems in their communities. They began to bring up tjukurrpa in their discussions of various issues. Before long they developed confidence enough to ask whether they might talk about relationships between men and women. Throughout the eight years during which I have facilitated “difficult discussions” among leaders of Aboriginal groups and communities, the unspoken and unspeakable problem of conflict and violence between men and women has been glaringly apparent. An Aboriginal woman is fifty times more likely to be physically assaulted by an Aboriginal man than a non-Aboriginal woman is by a non-Aboriginal man. In some communities, an unimaginably high percentage of young Aboriginal women have been sexually assaulted.

The Aboriginal women struggled to talk about these problems. The discussions did not go far and often ended stuck in the perpetrator-victim dichotomy. The women said that they found it difficult to talk about the problems they had with the men in their communities beyond simply blaming them. Some said they found it difficult to talk about the men when they were not present. Others said it would be impossible to talk about the problems with the men present. For one whole day, the women talked about the difficulty they have in talking about these matters. I encouraged them to think about their tjukurrpa.

The women began the next day with painting. A group of the elders painted a series of works depicting a tjukurrpa called “Man Stuck in a Tree.” According to the story they told, a man got stuck in a “bad” tree that had ensnared some young children. Why or how the man became stuck in the tree was not explained to me. The man, who had two wives, told both of them to keep going because a storm was coming. But the women cried and wailed, “We will not leave you,” and they sought help from a ngankari (traditional healer), who was able to use her power to free the man. After telling the story, the group of elders brought out three figurines made of grass: a man in a log, and two women crying and wailing by his side. Then, announcing that an inma went with that tjukurrpa, they sang it in harmony.

I was overwhelmed not only by the emotion of their tjukurrpa and their telling of it but also by the significance of their achievement. Once I had collected myself, I told them that they had found a way to talk about their difficult relationship with men. It was remarkable because most of them had witnessed or experienced violence by men, and they had found a way of talking without blaming. Within a few weeks, men and women in communities across the Central Desert were talking about that tjukurrpa. It was as if something had been awakened among them; something resonated across the gender divide, something from within their culture. The tjukurrpa enabled the men to think about their relationship with their women and what they have done to them without being overwhelmed by shame.

### **Men and Women Talking Together about Difficult Issues in the Community**

Some of the leaders of the original group of women, along with the staff of a non-Aboriginal organization that had been working closely with their community for several years, asked me to assist them in bringing together their leaders—men and women—to talk about the problems of domestic violence and child sexual abuse. These issues are among the most difficult to discuss openly in any community, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. They

arouse strong, sometimes unbearable, feelings of guilt and shame, which, if uncontained, can cause conflict and lead to outbursts of anger and violence in a group setting.

According to the concepts presented earlier in this article, this community might be considered to have been in a state of aggregation and fragmentation. In terms of common identification and collective action, there was no well-defined community. The most complex unit that demonstrated common bonds and purpose was through kinship affiliations: there were essentially two distinguishable units, and there was constant tension and frequent conflict between these two extended families. Even those bonds were fragile, and intra-family conflict and violence was common. Sometimes, the community appeared to be in a state of disintegration and implosion. In that state, as discussed earlier, a community exhibits resistance to the formation of groups, dramatic collapses of boundary, and catastrophic events such as outbreaks of suicide and communal violence.

Initially, the women leaders were encouraged when the men showed that they were eager to talk about these problems. The women also wanted to discuss these issues with the other women in their community and asked me to facilitate their meetings. The staff of the non-Aboriginal organization played a key role in facilitating the meetings with me, because they understood the relationships among the men and women and the points of tension and sensitivity in that community. A year later, after three meetings, the leaders appeared to have formed themselves into two groups, one of men and one of women, in which they felt confident to talk about personal and family issues among themselves and with me, the outsider. It was noted, however, that initially, almost all of the participants of those group meetings were from one of the two major extended families of that community. By the end of the first year, however, a few members of the other extended family joined in. One might suggest that at that point the community was beginning to bridge divides and move from the aggregation-fragmentation stage of traumatic regression to group formation with a focus on boundary and identity beyond their family group.

Encouraged by how well the groups of men and women were meeting, the non-Aboriginal staff, the Aboriginals themselves, and I decided that the two groups might be ready to meet together to address their shared concerns. The combined meeting, however, did not go well: some remained silent, some were restless and agitated, a few left early. It was unclear whether the problem was in the group itself (perhaps the men and women were not yet ready to meet together) or whether the men and women were affected by tensions in their community. The boundary between these groups of about twenty men and women leaders and their broader community appeared fragile and too permeable. Members of the community, especially their family members, frequently came into the meetings unpredictably. The collapse of boundary on one occasion was quite dramatic. Following a catastrophic event the previous day, several members of the community interrupted the meeting suddenly, causing it to be abandoned.

The preceding observations highlight the fragility of the boundaries in these traumatized communities. The non-Aboriginal staff and I wondered whether the merging of the two conflicting groups into one in an effort to enable discussion might have been premature. It may have heightened the fragility of their respective boundaries and identities. Interestingly, the men and women themselves asked to meet separately. This set-up continued successfully for several meetings during the next year: when the men and women were on their own, they were able to discuss their issues in some depth. By the following year, the men and women were able to meet together as one to discuss how they relate to each other. Significantly, there appeared to be less intrusion from members of the community into the combined meeting.

One wonders whether these observations suggest that when the boundaries of subgroups

(in this instance, male and female) are strengthened, their members feel more secure and are therefore better able to discuss difficult issues in depth among themselves and then feel secure enough to engage with another group (men and women combined). The strengthening of the boundaries of the subgroups could also lead to the strengthening of boundary in the whole group (hence, less intrusion into that group). This idea of strengthening the boundary of a group by first establishing stronger boundaries in its subgroups is worth further research. Proof that it is consistently effective could lead to a significant change in the conventional approaches to community-building that focus on the whole group.

The work with the men and women leaders in this community continues. One hopes that further attention to strengthening the boundaries will create the safe, supportive space necessary for them to face their pain of loss, shame, and guilt as they process their complex, collective trauma. In keeping with the typology of trauma outlined earlier, it is hoped that this work will not only stem the downward spiraling into fragmentation and disintegration but also allow the participants to reclaim their ability to engage with complex thinking and undertake the necessary cultural work. There are some signs that this hoped-for outcome is already taking place.

## **Cultural Work**

I would like to complete this article by discussing the work of these three groups of Aboriginal people with respect to the process I call “cultural work,” which I define as the collective psychological processes that operate within the cultural dimension, employing cultural substrates, structures, processes, and products to bring about changes in the culture. One might compare, to some extent, the cultural work undertaken by a community to repair its torn cultural fabric to the emotional work undertaken by the mind of an individual to recover from a mental breakdown. A key aspect of cultural work is that it is undertaken collectively, through shared experiences in shared spaces.

It might be argued that cultural work should be considered to involve collective cultural processes rather than psychological processes. But to me, these processes are psychological because I imagine them to be operating on the premise of a group mind, an entity that has been well considered in the literature in the past century that incorporates psychological concepts of the social and collective unconscious, trauma, defense mechanisms, thinking, regression, and notions of shared experience and shared space.<sup>16</sup> I am writing from the bias of a psychological perspective and would, therefore, accept other suggestions from a social or a wholly cultural paradigm to be equally valid.

In using a psychological paradigm, I have so far conceptualized three aspects of the cultural work a community must undertake to deal with community trauma: making sense of their predicament, linking the past with the present, and adapting to the present reality. The first task, *making sense* of their predicament, includes making sense of where they have come from (what was there before the trauma), what has happened to them and why (what was the trauma), and how they feel about what has happened (their response to the trauma). For the Aboriginals of the Central Desert, this process of making sense requires them to remember what they had before colonization and to acknowledge how colonization has affected them. This work is reflected in the statements quoted earlier: “Sisters, we had a beautiful country until the white people came and took it away” and “We lost our land, we lost our bush tucker, we lost our culture.” Over the ensuing months, the women painted their emotional response to this acknowledgment of what had happened to them, their sense of loss and grief.

With respect to the second task, *linking*, I have frequently observed that individuals and communities that have been traumatized are either wholly in the present, disconnected from

their past, or living fully in the past as if the present reality did not exist. The continuity and temporality of time appears to have been lost. Individuals who suffered war trauma in the past may respond to their present-day environment as if they were still in that situation. Adults who have survived childhood sexual abuse sometimes relate to their partners and therapists as if they were the abusers. Among the Aboriginals, some live as though the reality of the modern Western world does not exist despite their being in it, while others appear to have forgotten (or denied) the world they recently lost. One aspect of this latter phenomenon is the inability to see how their culture of origin is relevant to the present predicament. The ability of the second group of women leaders to reassert, through their recollection of their tjukurpa, the importance of their culture and its continuing relevance to present-day issues highlights this work of linking.

The linking of their past with the present invariably creates tension and anxiety. At the very least, there are difficulties that emerge from differences between their traditional culture and modern Western culture—values, worldview, conceptualization of self, structure of social relationships, and so on.<sup>17</sup> The Aboriginals speak of “living in two worlds.” An even more painful problem arises when Aboriginals experience their culture as being “trumped” by the culture of their colonizers. The sense of disempowerment is most painfully felt when they see their law being considered irrelevant in the presence of “white man’s law.”

This brings us to the third aspect of cultural work, the task of *adapting* to the present reality. There is a critical distinction to be made between cultural adaptation and adoption. Acculturated migrants who have simply adopted the culture of their new country and deny their own culture cannot be said to have adapted to the same degree as those who have found a way to meld their culture-of-origin with that of their adoptive country. The integration of two distinct cultures can be seen in the way some migrants, over several generations, combine the languages and cuisine of their origin with that of their adoptive country to create new idioms and new recipes. This process of adaptation does not deny the significance of the culture of origin, nor does it simply aim to preserve it in its traditional form. It involves selecting key aspects of the culture-of-origin and finding ways of expressing them within the everyday reality of the adoptive culture.

It would be insensitive to say that the Aboriginal men and women that I worked with now have to contend with “adopting” the culture of their colonizers. There is no element of choice here, in the sense that migrants have chosen to live in their adoptive country. There is, however, no doubt in many of the Aboriginal leaders’ minds that they need to adapt or they will perish.

The Central Desert Aboriginals have struggled to adapt, and in some ways, they have succeeded.

## **Emotional Work: A Precondition for Cultural Work**

Some of the examples of cultural work highlighted earlier involve a high degree of complex thinking. It is difficult to imagine, however, that severely traumatized individuals and communities would have the capacity to undertake the tasks involved in such cultural work while overcome by the pain of loss and grief, shame and guilt. The model of the psychology of trauma presented earlier highlights the propensity to engage in simple binary thinking when one is under the sway of overwhelming psychic pain. My experience with three groups of Aboriginals demonstrated their need to work through and overcome such pain before they could embark on cultural work.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the aspects of what I call emotional work to address the shared experience of grief, shame, and guilt. The emotional work undertaken

by the three groups of Aboriginal men and women enabled them to resist going down the spiral of regressive states and reclaim their ability for complex thinking that is necessary for cultural work. Their emotional work included the courageous working through of the pain of loss and grief, shame and guilt. This emotional work will enable them to come together to think (cultural work) about how they can address conflict and violence in their communities.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Peter Sutton, *The Politics of Suffering* (Melbourne: Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> Earl Hopper, "Encapsulation as a Defence against the Fear of Annihilation," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 72 (1991): 607–624; Felicity De Zulueta, *From Pain to Violence: The Traumatic Roots of Destructiveness* (Chichester, England: Wiley / Whurr, 2006); Eugen Koh and Stuart W. Twemlow, "Towards a Psychoanalytic Concept of Community (III): A Proposal," *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 2017, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.1528>.
- <sup>3</sup> Anna-Sapfo Malaspinas et al., "A Genomic History of Aboriginal Australia," *Nature* 538 (2016): 207–214.
- <sup>4</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1989).
- <sup>5</sup> Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines; The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997), available at <https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/the-report>.
- <sup>7</sup> Stephen Gray et al., *The Northern Territory Intervention* (Victoria, Australia: Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, July 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> Sonya Andermahr, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism—Introduction," *Humanities* 4 (2015): 500–505.
- <sup>9</sup> Hopper, "Encapsulation."
- <sup>10</sup> W. R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups* (London: Tavistock, 1961).
- <sup>11</sup> Vamik Volkan, "Traumatized Communities," in *Violence or Dialogue: Psychoanalytic Thoughts on Terror and Terrorism*, ed. Sverre Varvin and Vamik Volkan (London: International Psychoanalytic Associations, 2003).
- <sup>12</sup> Rob Gordon, "The Course of Recovery after Disaster" (paper presented at CIMA Conference, Melbourne, Australia, November 2011), <https://www.cima.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Rob-Gordon-The-Course-of-Recovery-after-Disasters.pdf>; Earl Hopper, *Traumatic Experience in the Unconscious Life of Groups: The Fourth Basic Assumption: Incohesion; Aggregation/massification or (ba) I:A/M*, International Library of Group Analysis (New York: Jessica Kingsley, 2003).
- <sup>13</sup> Kai Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: The Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976).
- <sup>14</sup> Koh and Twemlow, "Towards a Psychoanalytic Concept."
- <sup>15</sup> *Cicero's Tusculan Disputations*, trans. Andrew P. Peabody (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1886), retrieved September 15, 2016, from Internet archive, [https://archive.org/stream/cicerostusculand00ciceiala/cicerostusculand00ciceiala\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/cicerostusculand00ciceiala/cicerostusculand00ciceiala_djvu.txt).
- <sup>16</sup> William McDougall, *The Group Mind* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1920); Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 67–134 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955); Rene Kaes, *Linking, Alliances and Shared Space* (London: International Psychoanalytic Association, 2007).
- <sup>17</sup> M. S. Bain, *Adapting to Difference: Another Look at Aboriginal-Western Interactions* (2011), distributed by BookPal, ISBN 9781742840383.