Intergenerational Trauma: Understanding the Context for Diverse Populations and Treatment Implications

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The universal mission of social work is to promote social justice and change with and on the behalf of others. In order to provide effective practice, it is essential that social workers understand the historical and cultural context of the populations whom they serve. This includes intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma has been defined as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that is transmitted from one generation to the next (Dass-Brailsford, 2007;Raskoff, Sigal & Epstein, 1966). Historical trauma theory explains intergenerational trauma and how populations that are subjected to massive trauma (i.e. war, slavery, colonialism, and/or genocide) exhibit higher rates of disease or disorder generations after the trauma (Sotero, 2006). To date, much of the existing literature has focused on the intergenerational trauma associated with the Holocaust and the Native American "Trail of Tears" (Dass-Brailsford, 2007). Whitbeck (2004) discussed the development of the Historical Loss Scale and the Historical Loss Associated Symptoms Scale to measure historical trauma among Native Americans. There is a lack of empirical data measuring historical trauma with other ethnic groups that have experienced a collective trauma such as African Americans and the trauma of slavery. This presentation will address the following: 1) historical perspectives of understanding trauma for various ethnic groups, 2) understanding intergenerational trauma is a universal social work issue, 3) the need to develop more measurements that address historical loss with other ethnic groups and 4) understanding the treatment implications.

Keywords: Historical Loss Associated Symptoms Scale, Historical Loss Scale, Historical trauma, Intergenerational trauma, ethnically diverse populations