Collective Trauma as a Personal/Social Concern for Persons within Marginalized Communities

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Abstract: Much of the literature about trauma has conceptualized trauma only as a personal and psychological issue (Herman, 1992). This paper is a departure from this as it attempts to shed light on trauma as a community process such as the complex community responses to the experience of pervasive and ongoing injurious acts. The authors, with assistance from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council standard research grant, interviewed participants who are involved in community practice in three marginalized communities within two Canadian urban centers: 1) gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, and queer people; 2) Aboriginal people; and 3) Salvadorian refugees to understand social disruption that results from marginalization based on identity. In this paper, we argue that such a disruption, trauma, is shared across communities even if experienced differentially. We found that the participants’ experiences of trauma were expressed as both a personal and as a shared experience. Because of shared community identity, one did not have to experience the traumatic event personally to share in it. The participants of the research understood trauma to be deleterious and harmful but also allowed for an openness and affinity to others within their communities. Thus, trauma, while having serious negative impacts from its origins in social prejudice and mistreatment from outside the community, can also be seen as a basis for organization and resistance within marginalized diverse communities.

Keywords: Collective, Community, Trauma, Marginalization, Identity

A growing body of literature addresses how emotional responses are tied to social relations. Thus emotional affect is not separate from an individual’s relational networks. Specifically, community practice literature explores the multiple social networks people participate in to contribute to their emotional lives. Emotional experiences such as suffering are most often perceived to be private and experienced by the individual, however, affective states such as these are fundamentally social. One of the emotional states inextricably tied to social relations is the experience of trauma. In this article, we explore the relationship of trauma with the experience of marginalized community members. Specifically, the research team of five professors from three Canadian universities reports on a study, supported by the Canadian funding body, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, of community leaders within the Aboriginal, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Transsexual Queer (LGBTTTQ) and Salvadorian refugee communities. We argue that when a person is a member of a marginalized community, one does not have to personally experience a traumatic act in order to feel the emotional affect of that trauma.

Experience of Social Marginalization and Trauma

Marginalization represents a form of oppression that excludes entire groups of people from useful and meaningful aspects of participation in society. The results of marginalization may include material deprivation, social exclusion and under-employment. At the extreme, marginalization can result in the genocide of entire communities. Many marginalized communities constitute a growing underclass permanently confined to the margins of society because the education system or labour market cannot, or will not, accommodate them. Beyond
material deprivation, members of marginalized communities are blocked from the opportunity to exercise capacities in a socially defined way that is valued, recognized and respected socially. In Canada, the Aboriginal, LGBTTQ and Salvadorian communities have experienced social marginalization. Various authors have expanded on the link between individual affect and relational systems by focussing on how trauma is a shared experience with social roots among marginalized communities. Specifically, the social relations associated with the process of marginalization most often perpetuated by social forces outside the marginalized community contribute to a sense of trauma. Trauma is understood as a shared experience to which the entire community responds. Trauma is not a disorder to be medicalized and controlled by psychiatry, but rather a reaction to injurious social events and situations that cause people to be wounded. Trauma can also be conceived as being inherently political given that traumatic events occur within specific contexts grounded in societal structures. Burstow notes that when community theorists discuss trauma within communities, the intention is not to infer that all people within a given community are traumatized, but that “the community as an integral whole is traumatized” by social forces that are sometimes beyond their control. This traumatisation of an entire community results from the long-term oppressive conditions that dehumanize social relations among people.

The effects of social trauma affect the identity of community members as well as the social cohesion within the community. Eyerman argues that the effects of collective trauma can be profound, resulting in “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion”. Scott states a traumatic experience leads to “a perennial mourning of an identity long-lost and a perpetual sense of victimization that continues to weigh heavily upon much of the group”. Burstow asserts that community trauma may be expressed through despair, loss of tradition, losing direction, and the breakdown of people’s connections with each other. As a result, the impacts of trauma may also extend across generations. Wounds may be left unhealed, causing trauma to be experienced by various groups within the community on a daily basis.

Martín-Baró provides explicit examples of the social trauma experienced by Salvadorans in his writing about the effects of long-term political warfare on the Salvadoran population. He notes that as the government systematically imposed a “veil of lies” to dismantle the support rebel groups received from the masses, Salvadorans collectively resisted with a “veil of mistrust.” This social process subsequently led to the “social polarization [and] the displacement of groups toward opposite extremes”. This “veil of mistrust” became embedded into the collective psyche of Salvadorians. As a strategy to survive the repression, fear and horror enacted by the state to submit them into compliance and to discern who was and was not a state agent, people tended to mistrust everyone who could not prove they were on the same side.

Burstow further conceptualizes trauma as a loss of grounding, feeling overwhelmed and unsafe, and perceiving the existence of imminent danger, along with associated feelings of fear, hopelessness and despair. Despite these many troubling affects associated with trauma, it can also be seen as a manner with which marginalized people claim their own experience. Community members can be quite specific in describing social relations and social conditions that contribute to their trauma and avoid the homogeneous treatment associated with medicalizing treatment oriented discourses.

In spite of these tremendous pressures on marginalized communities, the relationships within communities can be the way through trauma. Herman observes that “those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest antidote to traumatic experience”. 
Moreover, the process of identifying a shared experience can also help communities to recognize a common cause of their pain, allowing them to further define and expand their solidarity.\textsuperscript{xxviii} Given that members of a community possess a unique understanding of their history and daily lives,\textsuperscript{xxix} their knowledge can be conceptualized as a “resource”; it entails their implicit but rich understanding of the context in which their trauma emerged and developed, how it affected their community, and how they have attempted to deal with its effects.\textsuperscript{xxx}

The Communities

Each of the communities in this study continues to struggle to make a place for their selves in Canada. All the communities are located in Ontario, a province of Canada. In light of the inequitable relations, many community workers perceive their work to be intricately linked to the marginalization of their communities.\textsuperscript{xxxi} The process of marginalization varies according to the identity of the community.

Aboriginal Peoples

There are a large number of nations that make up the First Nations of Canada. While there many similarities (for example, a relationship to the land that is both spiritual and economic) each Nation has a separate language, culture and each has a traditional territory to which they relate. Some of the First Nations in Canada include the Oneida, the Anishinaabe (Ojibwa), Mohawk, Okanagan and Shuswap nations. After a history of colonial oppression\textsuperscript{xxxii} and contemporary experience of mistreatment at the hands of federal and provincial governments,\textsuperscript{xxxiii} Aboriginal peoples have extremely high rates of poverty, incarceration, morbidity, and mortality.\textsuperscript{xxxiv} Even while education levels amongst Aboriginal people in Canada are rising, levels remain far below those of the mainstream. While Aboriginal communities struggle to maintain their culture,\textsuperscript{xxxv} traditional practices, spirituality and economy continue to be threatened.\textsuperscript{xxxvi}

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer Community

Canada’s LGBTTQ community is diverse in terms of racial, ethnic, class, ability and gender identities and members of the community experience marginalization in differential ways according to race, gender, and class.\textsuperscript{xxxvii} In the Province of Ontario, the community is widely dispersed, while having a geographic centre in the City of Toronto.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} Community members have experienced marginalization through silencing and the ongoing historical refusal to acknowledge their existence.\textsuperscript{xxxix} In addition, LGBTTQ persons have been highly regulated through police surveillance, legal action, moral judgement, and social ostracization so that many community members have not experienced full civic participation as valued citizens.\textsuperscript{xl} These many forms of regulation and discrimination are experienced by LGBTTQ persons are experienced daily through interpersonal and social interactions.\textsuperscript{xli} AIDS has had a significant impact on the LGBTTQ community as a form of marginalization that allowed persons to elaborate an extant bias that LGBTTQ persons are morally suspect and diseased. With AIDS, the shunning of these communities in Canada and internationally has been overt and commonplace.\textsuperscript{xlii} Members of the community need to be vigilant in terms of the threat of verbal prejudice and physical violence\textsuperscript{xliii} including backlash against the community’s advances in human rights and inclusion.\textsuperscript{xliv} Because of prejudicial treatment, community members who lose the support of family have had trouble gaining equitable access to social services. Some members of the community, especially the youth and the elderly, do not have access to proper material
care in terms of housing, health services, and food, and therefore are vulnerable to exploitation and poverty.\textsuperscript{xliv}

\textbf{The Salvadorian Community}

In comparison to other ethnic groups in Canada, Salvadorians are a relatively new community. Most Salvadorians living in Canada came from the rural areas of their country and have low levels of education. They arrived with few resources and with extensive exposure to traumatic experiences.\textsuperscript{xlvi} According to Landolt there are approximately 68,000 Salvadorians in Canada; 38,000 came as refugees and the remainder as family class or independent immigrants.\textsuperscript{xlvii} Nearly one-half of Salvadorians have settled in Toronto, Ontario and Montreal, Quebec.\textsuperscript{xlviii} An essential defining feature of Salvadorians in Canada is that they came legally, in contrast to the Salvadorian population in the United States. Another defining feature is the involvement of several religious congregations not only in sponsoring Salvadorians, but also advocating for policy changes and aiding in their settlement process during and after their arrival.\textsuperscript{xlix}

Salvadorians came to Canada during the economic recession of the 1980s. Most Salvadorians, men and women, are employed in the manufacturing industry. Others work in the cleaning industry. Women are also employed in the childcare industry and in the care of senior citizens. A small minority are business owners.\textsuperscript{l} Garcia notes that their average annual income is approximately $22,982, considerably less than that of the average national income. Approximately 20 years after their arrival, Salvadorians are still struggling to financially integrate into Canadian society.\textsuperscript{li}

\textbf{Research Method}

Our research sought to explore the notion of collective trauma as it pertains to the experience of marginalized communities. Through a previous three-year study on community practice we discovered that language commonly used in community literature did not adequately address the nature, effect or affective response to prejudicial social relations experienced by marginalized communities. To this end, we interviewed 30 community leaders, educators or advocates in a number of urban centres. Participants were recruited using a snowball technique, drawing on the researchers’ existing social networks.\textsuperscript{lii} This method was deemed particularly appropriate since the project was focused on community experiences and processes; therefore the trust of the community members is a key concern. The importance of trust is particularly salient when members of the communities feel they are on the social margins.\textsuperscript{liii} Each researcher asked members of the particular community he or she was most familiar with to suggest community workers willing to become engaged in the project. We interviewed eleven practitioners from the Aboriginal community, nine practitioners from the LGBTTQ community and ten from the Salvadorian community. The study participants included community members who are involved with social service organizations and/or are community leaders, spokespersons or activists. Interviews took place within a number of urban centres across Southern Ontario where there are sizable Aboriginal, LGBTTQ and Salvadorian populations.

The research team jointly developed an interview schedule focused specifically on the concept of trauma to explore these community issues and responses. The interview schedule sought to explore community members’ understandings of the concept of collective trauma asking questions to determine what the notion of a shared trauma means to them, the internal and external sources of trauma for the community, what collective trauma looks like manifested within the community, whether historical events have an impact on the community and how trauma affects efforts to organize within the community.
In order to analyze our results, we utilized a research method that reflects the recent trend in interpretive and reflective research designs as a means of opening space to examine issues related to community experiences of marginalization.\textsuperscript{iv} The purpose is to draw on the lived experiences of community members in order to inform our professional knowledge about community practice.\textsuperscript{v} We took an inductive approach looking for major themes that emerged from transcribed interviews.\textsuperscript{vi} During each research meeting, we explored new directions that the research data has taken us.\textsuperscript{vii} Furthermore, we reflected on how the conclusions of the research and the themes being defined could best be understood for each community.\textsuperscript{viii}

In addition, the research team invited an advisory group with membership from the Aboriginal, LGBTTQ and Salvadorian communities to assist with reflection on the research. The group was made up of six members with two community practice leaders from each of the communities studied. The advisory group was consulted around the purpose and direction of the research, the interview guide, and preliminary findings. We reflected along with the advisory board on how the conclusions of the research could best be understood for each community while looking to those with the greatest experience of a particular community to understand how it affects that community. The advisory board members drew upon their lived experience and insight to help us interpret our findings. The advisory group challenged some of the conclusions we had reached while at other times we reached easy consensus on the themes drawn from the data.\textsuperscript{ix}

Each member of the research team has a long-term personal and professional relationship with community members and practitioners in at least one of the communities. The relationship of the research team members within the communities is important in terms of access to the marginalized communities, trust levels for interviewing, and so that research members who most know a community could assist other team members in terms of data analysis and fairly representing the community being researched.\textsuperscript{x}

**Findings**

Through our longitudinal multi-year research of community practice within urban marginalized communities, we discovered that the term marginalization did not best represent some of the emotional responses and affect that influence the nature of community relations, and therefore community practice. The following findings about the shared nature of trauma are part of the exploration of the emotional element of community processes in marginalized communities. A key finding of our research on trauma is that individual or collective acts of prejudice or political violence that happen to one member of the community tend to have a traumatic effect on the other members regardless of geographical distance. There exists a type of affective affinity that ties community members together.

LGBTTQ community respondents noted the shared nature of trauma, while explaining some of the sources of that trauma including: political discipline by the state, prejudicial reactions to the disease AIDS, as well as the disease itself, and physical violence. In the following quote, we see how injurious acts can affect a person across national borders. Steven, a black, gay Jamaican-Canadian adoptive father, is in a same-sex marriage and works with youth and families. He explains:

> At the same time many – there was a vote in California about gay marriage right? And it was decided that they would ban gay marriage and in fact one state even banned adoption. I can’t remember if it was Illinois or but one of the American states also had a referendum on whether or not gays should be able to adopt children. It’s a huge issue in my life. So does that matter to me? Does it affect me? I think it does. Of course well I adopted a kid. There’s no ban here but I was very hurt..... In Arizona or wherever that
Steven speaks further about the intrinsic and transnational impacts of such decisions:

It would be like it means some part of the state in California doesn’t believe I’m a person or there’s some like there’s something evil, intrinsically evil about me that I would be banned from raising children. It only takes [...] one place. There’s something intrinsically evil about me being around children or raising children, instilling my values on or whatever gifts that I have you know not needed, just something, there’s something wrong. I think it, it is traumatizing. I think it is traumatizing.

Solomon, a Jewish female to male transgender person, is an activist who worked with youth. He explains how AIDS has historically been closely associated with the LGBTQ community in Ontario. AIDS was an epidemic firstly among gay men; and, in a contemporary context, the incidence of rate of infection continues to be high among gay men. Solomon explains that the perceptions about AIDS and the LGBTQ community have had a traumatic effect on community members, even when that person has not been infected with the HIV virus:

And then, I think also, the things that happen on a community level… that have ramifications for everybody, even if they haven’t, necessarily had a personal, individual experience of it. So things like, umm, things like HIV/AIDS that have a traumatic experience on the community level. Sort of, almost, in some ways regardless, they have different impacts on different people, for sure. Umm, but also have a community level effect.

He suggests that the trauma of HIV/AIDS occurs also at the community level, along with having an effect on many individuals in a community that is diverse.

Barb, a lesbian mother of Ukrainian-Canadian descent, is in a same sex marriage. She is the administrator of a large queer-focussed community based health programme. For many years she has been a community organizer who has built a network of services, particularly for queer youth. She elaborates Solomon’s feelings about the historical significance of AIDS as a traumatic community event by outlining the ways that AIDS has been traumatizing:

I think the AIDS crisis especially in the early years when people didn’t know what was going on and the response was really small and very blaming and victimizing and it sort of intensified all the homophobia that existed in society at that time. And people were experiencing incredible personal trauma through all the deaths that they you know that they had to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

Saul, a Jewish gay male, works with a community-based LGBTQ anti-violence and counselling programme. He explains how violence experienced by one member of the community can affect another member who has not experienced it directly:

Um for me the term collective trauma implies I guess how we each experience trauma in one way or another, either from our own personal trauma that we’ve experienced or from those that we know. And certainly you know there is unfortunately an abundance of violence and harassment that the LGBT community faces. And so if you yourself haven’t experienced a bashing or verbal harassment of one form or another it would seem very likely, it’s not impossible but you know of somebody who has [...] and so I think we all sort of experience, experience it in different ways but I think unfortunately it’s something that’s very familiar to us, to us all.
Barb is explicit in explaining that you need not have experienced the traumatic event itself to understand it. She explains the sources are multiple, from insecure employment, violence, legal actions as well as undue police force against LGBTTQ community members. She refers to the historical event of the bath house raids when police forced men to the streets with no clothes on to enforce bawdy house charges that were not held up in the court.\footnote{In an attempt to intimidate, silence and “re-closet” the newly visible gay community in Toronto, 150 police officers raided four gay bath houses arresting 300 innocent men in February, 1981. The police action galvanized the community and the night following the raid about 3000 people protested the raids. Over the following four months, raids and arrests continued and each attack on the community brought out new members to protest.} She states:

... to be someone who experiences that sense of collective trauma in a community doesn’t mean that you individually have to have experienced trauma, that you individually have to have been fired from a job or assaulted or threatened or anything like that. It’s about knowing that you are a member of a group to whom that happens a lot and where political decisions sometimes happen that are traumatizing where legal decisions happen that are traumatizing ... so I would define the bath house raids as a situation where collective trauma was created.

Barb goes on to explain how the various forces of trauma on community individuals affect all community members:

The whole sense of integrity of the whole group, that’s my sense of what collective trauma is... It is a constant reminder that you still are really vulnerable …. hated and despised And its not just one person, it is as a group.

For members of the LGBTTQ community the sources of trauma are multiple and, although identities of members are complex and varying by sexuality, gender and race, participants were able to identify both historical and contemporary events and injurious acts that resonate through this diverse community. This sense of trauma is known even when it is not enacted on those community members closest to the participants’ social identity. While there is divergence of experience due to identity among community members, trauma is shared because the experience of trauma in this complex community is a reminder for participants that the community as a whole is under constant threat.

Findings about the shared experience of trauma also emerge from the interviews with Aboriginal participants. The Aboriginal participants describe a shared experience of trauma, even if the traumatic event is not personally experienced. For some Aboriginal participants, trauma reverberates through communities across generations with the effects of trauma lasting and being re-experienced based on the impacts on previous generations. While the intergenerational aspect of trauma is implied in the LGBTTQ community interviews due to the age of participants and some of the events they discuss, the Aboriginal participants make explicit this intergenerational nature of trauma.

One of the ways in which collective trauma has resonated across generations is through parenting. Children, whose parents have experienced first-hand traumatic events, indirectly experience the same trauma based on how it affected their parents. Susan, an Ojibwa woman, describes ties to the acts of colonization, including settlement by white settlers and the residential schools.\footnote{Residential schools in Canada were mandated by the Indian Act of Canada. Children from four years of age were taken from parents and community a in schools run by white teachers (often of religious denominations). The purpose was to “kill the Indian” in the child. The practice resulted in untold misery and lasting harm to individuals, families and communities. Recently the Parliament of Canada made an apology to the survivors and their descendents} Violence and abuse, loss of cultural heritage, and destruction of spiritual beliefs are all consequences of these colonial relations and contribute to a shared sense of trauma:
So that, you know their parents, their grandparents you know the effect, especially residential school, you know, they were physically and sexually abused as children, isolated from their communities. And I know they saw no parenting skills during the time there; the impact upon community. And I think for sure, half the people, you have to look at it as part of the community thing.

She continues by explaining:

There’s something about it that makes your attitude, right? So when you look at what’s happened to us as people I believe we carry it generationally. So not only I’d say I see someone when they’re a survivor of child abuse and trauma, they’re also carrying the many generational impacts, the collective trauma from the time Europeans first arrived here. And so there’s a lot of the emotional trauma, you know, to crush, and anxiety and grief over the losses and pain in childhood - loss of having injured parents, loss of having injured family, loss of having an injured culture and all that stuff

Beverly, a Mohawk woman, also supported this notion of intergenerational effects of collective trauma:

I’m just thinking, um, in regard to collective trauma, when something happens to the community it impacts everybody in the community. So when I’m thinking of collectiveness or different effects or experiences, such as, like, residential schools, because it had an impact on the children. But not only did it have an impact on the children, it impacted the elders, and, like, grandparents. It impacted the parents, the other siblings of the children who went. It also goes across the generations and not only does it impact the current people that are different individuals or the current community that’s impacted by the particular trauma that they’re experiencing, it also goes across the generations.

The loss of historical knowledge due to colonization has resulted in the older generations not being able to transmit and share invaluable knowledge and cultural teachings. The effects of trauma are perpetuated by this loss of culture and historical knowledge, and those traumatic affects are experienced collectively. Beverly states:

But then again you can see some of the rather, a violent passing within traditional people where they don’t want to share their knowledge. So a lot of elders are dying. They don’t want to be called an elder and people that carry the knowledge are dying with the knowledge, with the language and everything like that and not being, not passing that on because they’re holding so tight because of the policies of not being able to practice our culture. But that’s changed now so we can practice our culture, but it has affected us greatly and as a collective.

Debbie, an Ojibwa woman, articulates a similar notion of having lost cultural teachings across generations. Debbie states,

I can kind of mention the effect that it’s had on our community in Northern Ontario where groups of children were removed from their families, and ten years they’ve come back. And the group dynamics within the families are - there’s this, there’s big gaps there so there’s a lot of social, like, like a lot of, there’s such a big gap in terms of communication and things like that with their families. And not just with this generation but also with the last generation in terms of, there’s a lot of cultural things that are missing that haven’t been taught, like your grandparents or your, where the older people
used to bring forward the cultural aspects of a person’s life in terms of the rites of passage for young people, which are really important both for the women and the men. Especially when they’re starting as a young person because all these things you learn when you’re young you’re supposed to, well, have been taught those things as you’re growing up. For a lot of the youth, a lot of us haven’t been able to get that knowledge of our traditions and culture.

The impact of collective trauma is also understood to include spiritual connections and relations with the earth and other beings as well. Land is not an economic commodity but part of the cultural and spiritual fabric of Aboriginal communities. Rick, an Oneida man, describes it this way:

I think that, for me that’s it, it’s this, it’s the spiritual, cellular connection to something that your mind doesn’t know about, and how I know I feel that way sometimes.....Collective trauma is all that shit that goes into the water in downtown (urban centre within which he lives), all the cars that are driving on the road, all the pollution that comes out of those factories. You know, the fact that those trees’ leaves are all dried up. The fact that all those floods are going on; that’s collective trauma. It’s wider than just the two-leggeds, like there’s the swimmers, there’s the flyers, there’s the tree people, there’s the rocks. They all feel it. They all feel it if it’s, so it’s kind of they all know what collective trauma is. So if I had a better word for you, would probably think something of how creation, you know, like how it reverberates to - it’s supposed to be our job to watch over that and to remind people of that.

In the following statement, Beverly relates to the notion introduced by Rick of trauma reverberating through creation:

Yeah, and even passed to grandchildren and so on and so on, yeah. They talk about being biological too that it goes to its deepest part of us to the blood and then to the genetics of the person

As with the LGBTTQ community members, a relational aspect of trauma exists so that it is a social construct for the Aboriginal participants. The connection between persons is understood within the worldview of Aboriginal teachings so that the spirit and creation tied to the social body of the diverse Aboriginal communities is affected by trauma.

Some Salvadorian participants confirmed the sense that trauma is shared. As with the other communities the sources of trauma are multiple including: extreme political violence, such as civil war and genocide; economic marginalization; as well as meaningless political gestures that remind community members of traumatic events. The following quote from Dinora highlights this theme:

In El Salvador we experience the genocide when Martinez (Genocide that occurred during 1930 during the presidency of General Maximiliano Martinez) killed peasants and Indigenous in Izalco and Nahuizalco. I was not even born yet, but my grandparents used to talk about it all the time. They were afraid… In our times we had the massacre of the Sumpul River, where children and women were murdered. We thought that could not be possible anymore, that this sort of massacres happened in our history, but not in our time… The Salvadorian society is a sick society the result of this is all the gangs that are nowadays in the country.

Dinora also reflects about how the trauma of the war is impacting the immigrant community’s ability to organize, both in Canada and in El Salvador:
I think it [trauma] has inhibited the community’s political organization. I tried to organize many things and some people always say, “I don’t go because so and so will be there.” Another person says, “So and so is from the left.”… organizing the community is very difficult. You have meeting after meeting and you cannot move forward… I remember in El Salvador the region where the massacre of Martinez had occurred (1930) was very difficult to organize as well.

Hector, a Salvadorian man, adds the following:

When they provided the Amnesty law in Salvador right after the U.N. published the truth report… That was one of the most painful days in my life because I knew that nothing is going to be clarified… And you know when nobody talks about the civil war… You know [there] is a political interest…

Hector outlines the difficulty of economic pressures and unstable employment:

The high level of alcoholism in the Salvadorian community is a problem… We have a lot of dysfunction in the families… You don’t see Salvadorians participating in the university… People are stuck in the lower level economically… They move from factory to factory… children don’t see any books in their houses. Is that part of [the] trauma that we have or is that the classism of the oppression that we’ve suffered…?

He further adds that shared trauma resulted in difficulties healing:

There is a circle of silence where nobody talks about the trauma of the war… people talk about it after dinner like some kind of dessert… they make jokes about it… but we do not talk about the many people who were tortured … the worse part of the trauma is not healing… not talking about it.

The Salvadoran participants speak to both the multiple sources of trauma and reveal the ongoing consequences of trauma the hardship that continues to exist between community members. Again, as with the other communities, historical as well as contemporary events affect the experience of trauma.

**Discussion**

The participants in this research chose to speak about trauma in association with the forms of marginalization that each community experiences. For LGBTTQ participants, trauma was associated with disease, death, as well as the lack of concern for disease that is concentrated within this community. As well, they spoke about moral judgement that leads to a feeling of dehumanization. Other social processes mentioned include blaming, victimizing and homophobic prejudice based in hatred. The threat of verbal and physical violence as a source of trauma was mentioned by more than one participant. Loss of employment due to membership in the community was also mentioned. For Aboriginal participants, trauma was also associated with violence and abuse. The roots of trauma are within colonial relations, including loss of cultural heritage due to aggressive acts by white settling culture. Also, death and lost knowledge, including the loss of tradition were mentioned as traumatic. The destruction of land and the

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3 The ARENA political party (conservative, military led), in 1993, created a blanket amnesty law which protected all military and guerrilla forces from prosecution stemming from human rights infringements (torture, rape, abduction, etc.) that took place during the time of the civil war. This means that those who committed abuses and killings are not held accountable for their actions and remain free and ‘untouchable’ in El Salvador.
environment has a special traumatic affect for this community since it also means the destruction of creation and an attack on Aboriginal spirituality. For Salvadorian participants, trauma was rooted in war and genocidal violence. The root of trauma is in the aggressive and violent acts leading to mistrust that are created through political divisions. It is also rooted in economic marginalization and insecure employment as immigrants to Canada.

These differing forms of marginalization suggest that trauma is experienced differently according to the community one is a member of as well as the social location within that community. At the same time, across the communities the social nature of trauma as tied to the marginalization experienced by the community as well as broader prejudicial relations is well understood by the participants. In each community participants called for the need to face such trauma and engage in processes of working through it and with it. The positions taken by Eyerman and Scott that the trauma becomes part of the identity of the community are supported by our research. In addition, participants often referred to how trauma was a crucial aspect of their connections with each other- whether those connections were troubled or supportive. Further, Burstow’s assertion of the notion of trauma as a political phenomenon is also echoed throughout the responses.

The participants explained that trauma affects both the entire community and individuals. They further explained that you need not experience trauma directly to be affected by a sense of ongoing insecurity. Our research supports the concept of communities of affinity based on an identity that exists across space and time. In fact, trauma is a defining characteristic of community members since there is such a strong affective affinity associated with it. The sharing of identity means the traumatic events that affect one member of the community of affinity are symbolic of social relations of dominance that characterize all members as unworthy, despicable.

Perhaps this sense of affinity is a hopeful moment for community practice engagement. Affinity does not assume that the playing out of relations between community members is always mutually supportive or helpful. And we need be careful that this discussion avoids the assumption of homogenization of identity within these complex communities or across the communities as defined in the research. One needs to be careful to not conceptually slip to characterize the trauma as individuated or as experienced as sameness or that identity categories are stagnant or additive. However, it is our hope with this research that the broad characterization of trauma can bring into sharper awareness the continuing and pervasive damaging affects of marginalization and prejudicial relations. As well, that a broad conceptualizing of affinity as shared experience that has a real affect on social interaction might be a useful concept to imagine how to deal with trauma. Resilience might be based in the ability to imagine this shared experience across diverse members of the same community. Also, this sense of trauma is a continuing reminder of relations of dominance; such awareness can either break a community or strengthen resistance and resilience. The shared identity allows for community identification that is necessary. Trauma continues to be present and ongoing within these communities because they continue to be marginalized and oppressed.
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