

Episode 11 - Dr. Shelly Wiechelt: Cultural and Historical Trauma: Affecting Lives for Generations

[00:00:08] Welcome to living through a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Odour Robinson. Culture is defined by the norms traditions customs and social institutions shared by a group of people with a common history culture shapes our values ideas attitudes and experiences. Race and ethnicity are the most obvious components of culture. But others include age gender sexual orientation geographic location and native first foreign born status. To name a few. Culture shapes how people see their world and structure their community and family life. Trauma is an event outside normal human experience. It is an event that is often sudden overwhelming and potentially life threatening. It leaves one feeling powerless helpless and paralyzed. Most of us have become familiar with the term PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder as an effect of trauma on individuals exposed to war terrorism or other violence. However we are less accustomed to understanding trauma as it affects cultural groups communally. Shelly Wiechelt is the exception. Dr. Shelly Wiechelt is an assistant professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County School of Social Work. Dr. Wiechelt has extensive practice experience in both substance abuse and mental health treatment settings.

[00:01:57] She has conducted research and taught numerous courses and continuing education workshops on evidence based practice substance abuse mental health and shame as well as the individual and community experience of traumatic events and its extent and intergenerational impacts. Now here's Dr. Shelly Wiechelt in a discussion on historical trauma. Susan Green associate clinical professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work is our interviewer. Shelly thank you for agreeing to be here with me today. It's my pleasure Sue. So you and I had the opportunity to work together several years back. And even at that time in our western New York area you were considered to be one of the people the experts if you will of practice folks or students would really approach you around your knowledge and experience when it came to the issue of trauma. So what I'd like to ask you initially is you know there's this term called historical trauma. What what is meant by historical trauma historical trauma is addressing the potential that people have experienced a trauma culture has experienced a trauma somewhere in their past and that that trauma accumulates across time and affects people intergenerationally for example the Holocaust was a trauma that was experienced by a generation of Jewish people and subsequent generations of Jewish people have experience problems related to that initial trauma and that cumulative horrendous horrific event affects people across time affects the culture and the people within that culture across time. So is it true that that when we've heard about intergenerational trauma historical trauma that even those that didn't go through the trauma at the time i.e. the offspring are impacted by the trauma that happened decades ago. Yes the offspring the subsequent generations of people who experienced the original trauma can exhibit problems like depression and anxiety and cumulated Grief is often a major impact.

[00:04:24] Maria Braveheart has done a lot of work under the Native American community on historical trauma and has actually developed a theory of historical trauma with the frozen grief experienced by particularly the Lakota community because of the genocide against Native American people and inability of the Native Americans at that time to really process the grief and that grief gets passed on across the generations. So you see problems in the Native American community like substance abuse depression anxiety suicides. So can you explain a little bit more what you mean by frozen grief because obviously it would extend beyond just one culture being that Native Americans. What do you mean by frozen in grief grief that's unresolved. So you have an

experience for example the Lakota people had an experience where there was a massacre and when that massacre occurred it occurred during the winter and their chief lay frozen on the ground and the community could not grieve in the ways of their people. And so that grief became a fixture within the culture. They were unable to express their sadness and express their loss as a culture and it was really a cultural trauma at the time it was really a trauma that overwhelmed the culture and contribute to wiping out the culture which was the intent of the U.S. government that time it was to do away with Indian culture trying to force Native Americans to assimilate into white culture. And they did that by systematically trying to tear down the culture. So you get rid of chiefs. You then remove children from the community and send it to boarding schools you don't allow people to speak the language. We don't allow people to practice their religion.

[00:06:28] So that culture experiences tremendous damage. And when the Lakota people experienced this trauma they had nothing they could do with it with the stress and so they experienced it in that time. In late 1800's experienced that trauma. And then they had children. And the experience of the original trauma gets transmitted to the children because there's so much unspoken material. There's sadness there's loss there's problems with coping and so the way to address it is to acknowledge that there was a wounding in the past and acknowledged that people are still feeling the loss of their culture. And how do we regain a culture and how do we heal within the culture. So I think what I'm hearing you say too is that it may not look like let's say post-traumatic stress disorder it might not be a full blown diagnosis that a group of people or an individual have that carry with them but say an element of historical trauma. But we might see post-traumatic symptoms. That's what you're describing I think when you talk about the people that might be in front of us. Well it could manifest in lots of different ways. Whenever any culture experiences the cultural trauma they have some event it could be a tornado. It could be war. It could be a terrorist attack. It could be a genocide it could be a forced migration and that experience overwhelms the culture and tears down the cultures supports and protective factors that the culture has. So people no longer have a way to say this is where I fit in the world. This is who I am in the world. These are the rules I need to follow.

[00:08:25] This is how I get my food. This is how we make products. This is how we train travel. All these things can be damaged and affected. So when people don't have that sense of safety and security within their culture it sort of blows out the way that they perceive the world and function in the world. And so now you have a culture that has had an original trauma that tries to struggle to overcome that. And if if they keep hold of that trauma and it's an ongoing trauma like what happened to the Native Americans that even experienced some aspects of trauma today in terms of things like epidemic disease. So you have a group experience the original trauma and perhaps that original group may have experienced symptoms like we think of PTSD but that original group has the original trauma but then they have children and then those children are exposed to an upbringing where they maybe have anxiety in the family they have perhaps violence in the family the social structures are diminished. So now the second generation is experiencing symptoms like depression like anxiety like substance abuse like family violence that can't really be hooked on to a specific trauma necessarily. So that accumulation of the cultural trauma that happened in the first place and then that which gets transmitted consciously through the family system processing or cultural process and then the person also starts to have perhaps some trauma in their life related to their substance abuse.

[00:10:10] So you get this compounding effect of original trauma across the culture and current life trauma and health problems and mental health problems and behavioral problems that may manifest in anxiety depression might look like PTSD but I think it's more often that because it's increased health problems perhaps low self-esteem inability to or to determine how do I fit in the world was it was my culture. How do I solve problems within my culture. Sort of this diffuse kind of lost feeling in and. It may not look like PTSD it may look like you have a lot of health problems in the

community. It may look like poverty. It may look like grief. It may look like substance abuse and high rates of violence in a community and the individuals who are living in that community are having compounding traumas occurring across generations. And you may see PTSD as well. But the important thing to recognize when you're dealing with a group that has experienced a cultural trauma is that this original trauma this past remote trauma can be having a profound effect on the individual the family and the community. And in order to help this person to attend to the challenges they're having in their life you need to help them heal that retrospective kinds of trauma. You have to recognize that this is a compounding effect and people need to really gain their culture regain their history and her. One of the things they intervention they developed to work with local community was communal grieving how we come together as a group and manage our grief and loss and they came together and in groups of people and did grief work around that original massacre in which their chief was killed. So that helps the community to heal their trauma.

[00:12:23] And as a community heals their trauma you can build on the resilience of the community and identify what is it that keeps us strong. What is it that allows us to survive this long. What is it that's good about our culture. So we bring in our elders and have our elders teach us about our community. We bring in our cultural history we use our language we practice our song we practice our dance. It rebuilds the culture and rebuilds the structure the culture to help people resolve the trauma at a cultural level and that cultural healing I think is important for groups that are experiencing these massive cultural and historical traumas I want to thank you in terms of what you just said about all that because I am not sure that many many individuals would think it through to the point that you just allowed us to really pay attention. So if I'm hearing this right. Bottom line is that we might have somebody or a group of people sitting in front of us that they may not even know themselves that part of what might be happening for them may have been from so long ago that it's just that it becomes almost a part of who they are and how they identify. So it might seem medical symptoms we might see psychological symptoms we might see spiritual symptoms. Therefore in terms of healing what needs occurs we need to help them recognize where they came from. Exactly exactly. Recognize where they came from. Recognize the wounding where they came from and also recognize the strength and where they came from and help them to Tasha that strength that their culture has and help them to bring that to the forefront in their healing. Thank you.

[00:14:15] I think it's an important piece of information for all of us to know. Thank you. You've been listening to a podcast featuring an interview with Dr. Shelly Wiechelt on historical trauma. We invite you to become a fan of Living Proof by visiting our Facebook page. Go there and tell us your questions comments and suggestions for future podcasts. Thanks for listening and tune in again to hear more lectures and conversations about social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community. More information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Here at UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.