

MEDIA RELEASE
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Psychologists call for recognition of indigenous trauma

Australian psychologists are calling for a rethink of the causes of indigenous Australians' health and social problems and recognition that they are largely the result of a history of widespread trauma.

The individual problems seen in indigenous Australians – alcohol and other drug abuse, depression, suicide – and the social problems seen in indigenous families and communities – family violence, child abuse, sexual assaults – are best understood as the well-known consequences of traumatic experiences. As a community, we need to provide evidence-based interventions known to help victims of trauma: validation of their emotional responses at the time and since, support for their re-empowerment to overcome the harmful effects and to take charge of their lives again.

'Ever since British colonisation, successive governments have adopted policies and practices founded on the misguided belief that indigenous Australians were genetically or culturally inferior,' said Amanda Gordon, President of the Australian Psychological Society. 'When they weren't being actively forced off their traditional lands, they were regarded patronisingly as needing special care to make them more like non-indigenous Australians. This assumption of intrinsic inferiority, which has no scientific basis, still permeates much of governmental policy. The removal of children from their mothers as Government policy over decades has had longterm consequences for the mental health of aboriginal peoples.'

'It would be a useful exercise, while we are commemorating the referendum, for non-indigenous Australians to spend just a couple of minutes trying to imagine what that experience must have been like. Never knowing when government authorities would descend on your home and take away your children. What was the parents' grief like? What was the children's experience of being officially abducted, forcefully removed from their family, placed in a series of institutions or eventually used as cheap, unskilled labour?'

The validity of the effects of trauma in non-indigenous Australians has been recognised, despite their experiences being possibly less traumatic than those endured by indigenous Australians. The intergenerational transmission of traumatic effects in groups such as Vietnam veterans has been recognised. Lingering prejudice may be preventing the same recognition for the plight of indigenous Australians. Traumatic experiences affect parents and children, and spread through extended families and future generations. People exposed to such trauma often have later difficulty parenting effectively or coping with stress without turning to unhealthy supports. It is time to acknowledge the psychological evidence and respond to these peoples' traumatic histories compassionately, and with the understanding that they are still causing an impact today.

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