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Addressing Native Hawaiian historical trauma: Opportunities for increased economic, environmental, and social advancement

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Abstract

Many people view Hawai'i as a tropical paradise where people can relax on idyllic beaches. However, for many Native Hawaiians, the Indigenous people of Hawai'i, the desire to continue to reside in their homelands has become impossible. Native Hawaiians have lower socio-economic status, home ownership, and educational attainment compared to non-Hawaiians. Simultaneously, Native Hawaiians have higher rates of chronic disease, asthma, and mental health issues, which impact their quality of life. Despite efforts to address these stubborn problems, the gap between the Indigenous Native Hawaiian community and those that settled these islands continue to exist. Native Hawaiian scholars have attributed these persistent challenges to the historical trauma that the community has experienced and continues to experience stemming from the mass trauma events of colonization. Although the community acknowledges the heavy impact that historical trauma has had on Native Hawaiians, many policymakers and individuals in position of authority have expressed a need for evidence of this concept. This project seeks to develop a scale to measure Native Hawaiian historical trauma to support evaluation and advocacy efforts. Moreover, healing Native Hawaiian historical trauma would facilitate increased economic mobility, improved environmental policies, and an enriched social advancement.

Keywords

Indigenous; Wellbeing; Historical trauma; Scale development; Advocacy

Societal impacts

Despite efforts to address disparities, Native Hawaiians, the Indigenous people of Hawai'i, have lower socio-economic status, home ownership, educational attainment, and physical and mental health compared to non-Hawaiians. Prior to contact, the Hawaiian islands were

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Ethics statements

Institutional Review Board Statement: The underlying study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Hawai'i M noa (protocol number 2021-00034 originally approved on 22 April 2022). Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

an abundant place and could sustain the healthy lifestyle of pre-contact Native Hawaiians. Today, however, Native Hawaiians have some of the highest rates of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and depression, along with some of the lowest self-rated wellness [2,6]. The Department of Native Hawaiian Health attributes these disparities to historical trauma stemming from the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom [7]. Historical trauma is the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from a massive group trauma event” [4]. Notwithstanding this evidence, some policymakers have suggested that Native Hawaiian historical trauma either does not exist or exists only among a small portion of the community.

Historical trauma represents unresolved grief and is the bedrock of continuing political, social, and psychological harms perpetrated against a people [5]. Providing access to health care and mental health services without delving into the deeper historical trauma people experience merely treats the symptoms while allowing the illness to progress, accumulating across generations. Therefore, developing interventions that address historical trauma and being able to measure their efficacy is a critical first step to beginning to heal the trauma that this community has experienced. Currently, while a scale exists to measure historical trauma among Native Americans, no tool exists to measure historical trauma among Native Hawaiians.

This project seeks to develop a scale to measure Native Hawaiian historical trauma, which would facilitate healing in four ways: 1) determine the prevalence of historical trauma; 2) evaluate the efficacy of innovative interventions; 3) provide justification for increased funding for healing programs; and 4) determine which characteristics in existing programs support healing historical trauma. Moreover, because historical trauma exists in many communities, being able to adequately address this issue in Hawai‘i could serve as a template for other communities that are struggling to heal from their collective trauma.

Methodology

The Native American Historical Loss Scale, which measures Native American historical trauma, was only validated in the Native American community [12]. Several studies applied the Historical Loss Scale to Native Hawaiians and found that there were significant variations in some of the results requiring the scale to be adapted for the Native Hawaiian community [1,9]. While Native Americans and Native Hawaiians have significant overlap as Indigenous peoples, each have a unique colonial history [11]. Compared to Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, as an archipelagic community, have differing geographic experiences, challenges due to over-dependence on tourism, and issues resulting from a lack of political self-determination [10].

Few studies directly address Native Hawaiian historical trauma. In addition to the two that quantitatively analyzed the Historical Loss Scale, our recent qualitative study that focused on justice-involved and at-risk youth sought to understand whether and how Native Hawaiian youth experienced historical trauma [10]. This study used Indigenous research methods to identify 8 themes and 35 sub-themes related to historical trauma among Native Hawaiians. See Table 1 providing a full listing of themes related to Native Hawaiian

historical trauma among youth. In addition to youth, this study also conducted talk story interview sessions with adult service providers who worked with these youth. The findings indicated significant overlap with Native American populations, but also identified several key distinctions. Using the results of this study we conducted a crosswalk analysis with the Historical Loss Scale to highlight the areas of overlap and distinction confirming that Native Hawaiian historical trauma is unique and calling for an adaptation of the Historical Loss Scale [11].

Results and implications

Although the youth participants (age 15–24) had varying cognitive abilities with some struggling to articulate their present-day trauma in terms of historical events, it was clear that the remnant effects of colonization impacted these youth. This can be seen in many of the themes, which align with the symptoms of historical trauma, including anger, hopelessness, fear, anxiety [12]. In addition to these negative emotions, the youth were able to articulate activities that they perceived to relieve some of their negative feelings. For example, overuse of technology like cell phones and self-harm alleviated some of these negative emotions. These results provide preliminary evidence that Native Hawaiian youth experience historical trauma. Based on this information renewed calls for targeted governmental funds to develop and expand interventions that heal historical trauma are being made. A validated historical trauma scale will incorporate both proximal and distal impacts, while the ability to identify appropriate interventions has the potential for immediate administrative impacts.

Implication 1

Because Native Hawaiian advocates are met with resistance when attempting to advocate for historical trauma programs, our project sought to adapt the Historical Loss Scale for the Native Hawaiian population in order to obtain critical data. The inability to provide policymakers with the data that justifies the need for healing programs obstructs advocates' ability to quantify problem severity, which is a critical element of the policy process.

Moreover, being able to determine the prevalence of historical trauma in this population allows advocates to craft strong policy arguments that can be used to support the need for additional funding and state-wide programming [3]. To address this we drafted a policy brief on Native Hawaiian historical trauma that was made available to our community partners as well as key legislators. The policy brief leans on the legitimacy of academic researchers and identifies a clear gap in historical trauma policies in Hawai'i. These advocacy efforts were added to pre-existing efforts, which facilitated the creation of an Office of Wellness and Resilience within the Hawai'i Governor's Office. Hawai'i is the first state in the US to have an agency focused on resilience and wellbeing. Additional advocacy efforts by members of the community include formal reconciliation between the US and Native Hawaiians for the illegal overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i and funding reparations for prior ill-treatment of Native Hawaiians.

Finally, the lack of a mechanism to measure historical trauma among Native Hawaiians effectively obstructs the ability to develop and evaluate culturally appropriate interventions. Without a measure it is difficult to provide evidence that programs benefit participants.

A quantitative scale would allow Native Hawaiian community organizations engaged in healing activities to evaluate their programs' efficacy for funder reports, which can translate to increased revenue allowing these organizations to reach more individuals in need. Often programs that address historical trauma and work to improve health and wellness fail to be widely adopted and implemented due to a lack of empirically quantified evidence of programmatic success [8]. We intend to share the scale widely with Native Hawaiian organizations so that they can benefit.

Implication 2

Although not our original intention, our preliminary results have drawn interest from part of the judiciary. Restorative-minded judges and administrators are interested in utilizing both the scale and also the preliminary qualitative results to aid in identifying restorative programs that the courts should partner with. Because our themes highlight the domains of historical trauma, programs that address each of those domains theoretically should help heal historical trauma. For example, one of our key findings is that working with the 'ina (land) was healing for the youth. Additionally, youth were upset by the degradation of the environment, especially by tourists. Thus, logic would dictate that partnering with organizations that incorporate m lama 'ina (caring for the land) and empower youth to be able to protect the environment through advocacy would be beneficial. In this way, the themes can be used as one factor to determine programmatic partnerships and preferred diversionary programs.

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Table 1

Themes related to Native Hawaiian historical trauma among youth.

Themes	Sub-themes	Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Pe'a ka lima i ke kua (Emotions)	Ke kaumaha (Pain/Sadness) Ka huh (Anger) M newanewa (Loss of Control) Pau ka pono (Hopelessness) Ka hopohopalulu (Anxiety/Fear) Ka ha aheo (Pride)	Theme 2: 'Auana I ke kula 'o Kaupe'a (Escaping from grief)	'Ai l 'au 'ino (Substance Use) Lilo i ka 'enehana (Technology as a Distraction) Ka h 'alo (Avoidance) 'Imi Loa'a (Consumerism)
Theme 3: He ali'i ka 'ina (Land is a chief)	Ka lilo ka 'ina (Land Loss) Ka hana 'ino i ka 'ina (Environmental Destruction) Ka ho'ihoi'ina (Return Land) Ke aloha 'ina (Land as Healing)	Theme 4: K i ka welo (Family Connectedness)	Ka 'ohana (Family Support System) Ka hilihewa o ka makua i ke 'ano haole (Distortion of Parental Values) Ke kauhale (Connectedness to Extended 'Ohana and Community) Ke Kupuna (elders)
Theme 5: Ho'ohikihiki (Dreams, but not for me)	Ka nohona Hawai'i kahiko (Thriving in the Past) Ka waiwai k l (Money/Haves and Have Nots) N hale (Housing) Ka h 'ole kahuna (Anti-intellectualism)	Theme 6: ' naehana Huikaulua (Messy System)	Ka pono waiwai haole (Colonialism and Other -isms) Ka malihini (Tourism) Ka p 'ali koa (Militarism) Ka 'eha'eha ma ke kula (School Re-traumatizes) N k kua kamali'i (Child Welfare Services) Ke olakino kau'a (Health Disparities/COVID) Ka ho'opa'a hao (Carceral System)
Theme 7: Hihia H k k (Entangled/Sprawling Trouble)	N pilikia kaiaulu (Community Conflict) N pilikia k loko (Internal Conflict)	Theme 8: Ho'i ka pono (Restoring Balance)	Ka ho'omana (Empowered Education) Ho'ihoi'ea (Re-Empower Community) Ka ho'oulu alaka'i (Growing Leaders) Ka nohona 'ae'oa (Increase Self-Sufficiency)