

Understanding collective trauma

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What is cultural trauma?

Chat box

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective group “... are subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 1).

“A cultural trauma occurs as the taken-for-granted foundations of individual and collective identity are shattered, setting in motion a discursive process to understand what happened, assign blame, and find pathways to repair an interpreted situation” (Demertzis & Eyerman, 2020, p. 428).



Tenets of cultural trauma

Cultural trauma “. . . is not the result of an event but the effect of a sociocultural process . . . the result of an exercise of human agency” (Alexander, 2012, p. 15).

- Shared suffering among a group
- Injury to a group’s collective identity following a cataclysmic event
- Disruption of the “taken for granted”
- Fracturing of security afforded by a firm sense of identity

Source: Demertzis & Eyerman (2020).

Elements of Cultural Trauma



Emotionality
(mostly negative)



Blame attribution (such
as media claims)



Identity formation
processes



Defense mechanisms
(artistic creation)

Source: Demertzis and Eyerman (2020).

Taken-for-granted foundations



**According to the July 4, 1776,
Declaration of Independence,**

“...We [can] hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Chat box

What are some of *your* taken-for-granted beliefs, routines, traditions, and nonnegotiables that are presently being challenged?

Foundations shaken

- Shelter in place.
- Socially distance.
- Wear a mask.
- Wash hands and sanitize surfaces.
- Avoid gathering in groups or attending social events.
- Get tested.
- Wait for availability of a vaccine.
- Take the vaccine; anticipate side effects.



“In COVID-19 as other looming global crises—health inequity and climate warming—the scientific evidence has been marginalized, the public perception of risk has been undermined, and the critical coordination at the local, city, state, and federal levels has been weakened”
(Watson et al., 2020, p. 11).

COVID-19: A triggering event for trauma

Americans are brave, self-sufficient, and invincible. We're survivors!

Cultural identities [beliefs, knowledge, behaviors, and trauma(s)] are intact.

Newly traumatizing events (such as COVID-19) challenge cultural identities.

We have to do what? I have the right to "do me"; this is a free country.

Cultural identities are thrown into a state of flux.

Do I really have to wear a mask?
When is this going to be over?
Where is the cure for this?

Source: Luna Recovery. (n.d.).

Collective trauma

Collective trauma is defined as an entire group's psychological reaction to a traumatic event that affects an entire society.

- It is represented in the collective memory of the group and involves not only a reproduction of the event but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma.
- It emotionally connects people around the globe through experiences of helplessness, uncertainty, loss, and grief.
- It can persist across time and generations.
- It illuminates the interconnectivity of the health, education, social, economic, and political landscapes.

Source: Watson et al. (2020).

*“Collective traumas are reflections of
neither individual suffering nor of actual events,
but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them.
Rather than descriptions of what is,
they are arguments about what must have been
and what should be.”*

(Alexander, 2012, p. 4)

Potential causes of collective trauma

- An event that violates familiar ideas and expectations (for example, access to known ways of being and living; access to residence/territory, traditional foods, medicines, and resources) held individually and collectively about the world.
- Atrocity or extreme adversity (such as natural disasters, manmade disasters, health crises).
- Deliberate and systematic destruction that reduces a group's cultural identity to one dimension (for example, religion, ethnicity, skin color) that the perpetrator deems unacceptable.









Source: Aydin (2017).

What emotion comes to mind when you recall these events?

Chat box

- California wildfires
- Hurricane Katrina
- Thailand tsunami
- SARS outbreak in 2003
- Black plague
- HIV/AIDS epidemic
- Ebola outbreak in 2014
- COVID-19 pandemic
- German Holocaust
- Trail of Tears
- Relocation and extermination of native people
- Atlantic slave trade
- Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in 2012
- Parkland School shooting in 2018
- Boston Marathon 2013 bombings
- September 11, 2001, terrorist attack
- Orlando, Florida, Pulse Nightclub mass shooting in 2016
- George Floyd's murder in 2020
- Boko Haram abduction of more than 200 Nigerian schoolgirls in 2014

Potential effects of collective trauma

- Mental health and well-being. 
- Intergenerational trauma. 
- Threats to identity and culture. 
- Social solidarity. 
- Increased empathy. 
- Societal changes.   

Cascading collective traumas

Cascading collective traumas are defined as a series of compounding catastrophes that may be both historic and concurrent in nature and yield stronger emotional responses with each new exposure (Silver et al., 2020).

Examples:

Global pandemic; race-based historical traumas; brutal killings of unarmed Black people (for example, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor); the videotaped death of George Floyd; the point-blank police shooting of Jacob Blake, with seven bullets to his back; multiracial protests; social unrest; political divisiveness and violence in the streets; extreme weather events (including devastating hurricanes, record heat waves, disastrous wildfires), many of which required evacuations.

Impact of cascading collective traumas in the United States

- Dominant cultural values of rugged individualism and self-determination challenged.
- Global interdependence and interconnectedness illuminated.
- The crucial role of families in an individual's physical and mental health functioning highlighted.
- Economic vulnerability and food insecurity revealed.
- Disproportional impact on marginalized citizens, particularly people of color, laid bare in areas of education, transportation, income, health, housing, and mortality.
- Importance of digital connectivity clarified.
- Inequities linked to racism and classism and used to blame marginalized groups for failures across the spectrum of health, job success, school success, and others illuminated.
- Advancements in science and medicine realized to be insufficient.

Source: Watson et al. (2020).

Collective cascading traumas in U.S. education

- Teacher shortages intensified by a trend of early retirement and considerations for their and family members' health- and age-related vulnerabilities ([CNBC, October 9, 2020](#)).
- U.S. public school systems lost nearly half a million teachers in April 2020 alone; high attrition rates among older teachers are impacting the number of experienced and credentialed teachers ([Economic Policy Institute, October 16, 2020](#)).
- Cogna surveys of 74,000 teachers, parents, and students reveals more work, less academic rigor in schools, and anxiety over student readiness ([Businesswire, October 29, 2020](#)).
- Increased suicide rates, and suicidal ideation among school-aged youth ([Martinez, December 9, 2020, Fox 5:KVVU-TV, Local Las Vegas](#)).
- Increased rates of academic failure in the K–12 education context ([The Washington Post, November 24, 2020](#)).

Collective cascading traumas in U.S. education

- Misalignment of existing school policies and practices to COVID-19 context. ([DeBerry, December 11, 2020, Louisiana Illuminator](#)).
- Disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on students who are historically underserved, their engagement in school, and access to key resources (including computer devices and broadband; food; safety and supervision; transportation; high-quality, standards-based, grade-level instruction; ([Dorn et al., June 1, 2020, McKinsey.com](#))). Engagement rates indicate that schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic students are lagging behind; only 60 percent to 70 percent are logging in regularly.
- Disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the physical and social emotional well-being of students from underserved racial and ethnic groups because of health equity considerations ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 24, 2020](#)).

Our collective narrative

“[T]he true measure of our society, our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

(Stevenson, 2015, p. 18)





Trauma and you ...

How have you and your colleagues been affected by cultural trauma?

How have your students been affected by cultural trauma?