

# Chapter 1

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## The Lens of Culture: Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives in the Assessment of Psychological Trauma and PTSD

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### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between trauma and culture is an important one because traumatic experiences are part of the life cycle, universal in manifestation and occurrence, and typically demand a response from culture in terms of healing, treatment, interventions, counseling, and medical care. To understand the relationship between trauma and culture requires a “big picture” overview of both concepts (Marsella & White, 1989). What are the dimensions of psychological trauma and what are the dimensions of cultural systems as they govern patterns of daily living? How do cultures create social–psychological mechanisms to assist its members who have suffered significant traumatic events?

Empirical research has shown that there are different typologies of traumatic experiences (e.g., natural disasters, warfare, ethnic cleansing, childhood abuse, domestic violence, terrorism, etc.) that contain specific stressors (e.g., physical or psychological injuries) that tax coping resources, challenge personality dynamics (e.g., ego strength, personal identity, self-dimensions), and the capacity for normal developmental growth (Green, 1993; Wilson, 2005; Wilson & Lindy, 1994). Traumatic life events can be simple or complex in nature and result in simple or complex forms of post-traumatic adaptation (Wilson, 1989, 2005). Similarly, cultures can be simple or complex in nature with different roles, social structures, authority systems, and mechanisms for dealing with individual and collective forms of trauma. For example, dealing with an accidental death of one person is

significantly different from coping with the aftermath of the worst tsunami disaster in the history of humankind (2004) that caused massive death of thousands, destruction of the environment and the infrastructure of cultures. In this regard, it is important to understand how cultures utilize different mechanisms to assist those injured by different forms of extreme stress experiences. The injuries generated by trauma include the full spectrum of physical and psychological injuries. In terms of mental health and counseling interventions, this includes a broad range of posttraumatic adaptations that include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mood disorders (e.g., major depression), anxiety disorders, dissociative phenomena (Spiegel, 1994), and substance use disorders. In terms of mental health care, cultures provide many alternative pathways to healing and integration of extreme stress experiences which can be provided by shamans, medicine men and women, traditional healers, culture-specific rituals, conventional medical practices, and community-based practices that offer forms of social and emotional support for the person suffering the adverse, maladaptive aspects of a trauma (Moodley & West, 2005). But how does culture influence an individual's reaction to trauma? How do they make sense of their experiences in situations of extreme stress? In this regard, Smith, Lin, and Mendoza (1993) state: "Humans in general have an inherent need to make sense out of and explain their experiences. This is especially true when they are experiencing suffering and illness. In the process of this quest for meaning, culturally shaped beliefs play a vital role in determining whether a particular explanation and associated treatment plan will make sense to the patient . . . Numerous studies in medical anthropology have documented that indigenous systems of health beliefs and practices persist and may even flourish in all societies after exposure to modern Western medicine . . . These beliefs and practices exert profound influences in patients' attitudes and behavior . . ." (p. 38).

## CASE HISTORY

To illustrate how culture shapes belief systems and influences the perception of traumatic events and their subsequent processing and integration into cognitive structure of meaning and attribution, let us consider the following case example.

In 1985 I attended an intertribal "pow wow" on the Lakota Sioux Indian reservation in South Dakota (Sisseton-Whapeton). The pow wow was a 4-day event for Vietnam War veterans and their families. The event contained Native American ceremonies and rituals to honor the veterans for their military service and sacrifices. These ceremonies included sweat lodge purification (Lakota Warrior "sweat" for healing), the Red Feather induction ceremony, traditional communal singing and dancing, potlatch

sharing of gifts, and ceremonial fires with “talking circles” and communal dinner with the eating of traditional foods.

During this pow wow, I had the opportunity to meet several Lakota Sioux Vietnam combat veterans. Among them was a veteran whom I will refer to as Tommy Roundtree (not his real name). Tommy was a two-tour combat veteran who had been highly decorated for his valor and courage in combat with the 101st Airborne Brigade between 1967 and 1969. Tommy grew up on the Rosebud reservation of the Sioux Nation in South Dakota. He was an athletic, tall, handsome man with black hair and ruddy dark skin. In many respects, he had a “Hollywood” character that resembled the famous actor, Erroll Flynn.

When I met Tommy, he was dressed in traditional tribal clothing and had his face painted. Visibly noticeable were the scars on his chest and back from when he had participated in Sun Dance ceremonies in which the participants were skewered with straps to a pole located in the center of a pow wow arena. The straps are skewered into pectoral and upper back muscles by small bones or sticks. At the climax of the Sun Dance ceremony, which involves dancing and blowing through a small bone, the celebrant, at the critical time, leans back and releases himself from the straps which link him to the pole. The skewers tear the skin and cause bleeding. The Sun Dance ceremony is a physically arduous process and requires stamina, mental concentration and preparation, including a Sweat Lodge purification prior to the actual Sun Dance itself. In traditional ways, it is thought that the ritual aids in the development of spiritual strength. When I observed Tommy’s scars, he immediately told me that he had done three Sun Dances during his life, two prior to deployment to Vietnam. I told him that I had read about the ceremony and others that were part of Lakota culture. It was at this point that he said, “You know, John, I would like to talk with you about my Vietnam War experiences, but I am afraid that you will think I am crazy or psychotic if I tell you how I understand what happened to me there and since coming home from the war.” I responded that I have great respect for traditional Native American culture, especially Lakotan, and would like to hear his story. He smiled nervously at me as I looked at him straight in the eyes and said, “Well, okay, let’s talk.”

We found a quiet spot in the pow wow grounds and began to talk. In the background, the pulsating beat of the tom-tom drums could be heard along with the singing of traditional songs. Tommy explained that prior to his deployment to Vietnam, the tribal elders prepared him in various ways for going to war. He was taught to sing his “death song” if fatally wounded. He was instructed as to how to use his native cosmology and natural connection to the earth and its creatures to help him stay alert and knowledgeable about danger and threats. Tommy said, “In Vietnam, I would ask the insects to be my eyes while I slept to look for the enemy;