

## Working with Indigenous survivors of sexual assault

DORINDA COX

When I was approached to write this, I felt honoured to be able to author a paper on such an important topic, which has also been the primary focus of my work for the past three and a half years. I have worked directly with Indigenous survivors of sexual assault in my role as the Aboriginal Liaison Officer for the Perth Sexual Assault Resource Centre, and indirectly in my current role as the Project Manager of the Aboriginal Healing Project, Western Australia (WA), a project funded by the Australian Government's Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, FaHCSIA. But my connection to sexual assault issues dates back at least ten years: before working in the sexual assault sector I held a position in the WA Police Service and was trained to obtain statements from adult sexual assault survivors and children, particularly Indigenous survivors.

Working in the area of sexual assault is not an easy task. I have often tried mapping out the most appropriate approach for dealing with the impact and process of healing for Indigenous sexual assault survivors. I've come to the conclusion that one size doesn't fit all, and that it will always be a continual learning process for everyone involved.

While my observations and interpretations on this issue are made as a professional Indigenous woman working in this area, they are also made as a member of a family, community and wider society. Also, each of these spheres of influence (family, community, society) create a different approach or response to Indigenous sexual assault. They have the power to enable or disable the ability of a survivor to heal from sexual assault and other unresolved traumas.

This paper includes the historical and contemporary aspects of sexual assault as they impact on Indigenous people. It suggests some improvements to existing service delivery to enable cultural appropriateness, and it gives some advice on the skills and knowledge needed in order to work effectively with Indigenous people.



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The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault aims to improve access to current information on sexual assault in order to assist policy makers, service providers, and others interested in this area to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent, respond to, and ultimately reduce the incidence of sexual assault.

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## Introduction

There is nothing new or extraordinary in the recent allegations of sexual assault of women in Indigenous communities in Australia. What is new, perhaps, is the publicity given to these issues and a raised awareness in the wider community. They also highlight the urgent need for culturally appropriate services for Indigenous survivors of sexual assault. The need for these services has been a longstanding debate raised in many arenas, but particularly in government and in service delivery. The issue has also been highlighted in several reports commissioned by state and territory governments. For example, reports such as *Putting the Picture Together* (Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry, 2002), *Protecting Children* (Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004), *Sexual Offences* (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004), and *Breaking the Silence* (NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce, 2006) all outline the endemic nature of sexual assault and its impact on Indigenous women, their families and communities.

Often, sexual assault has only been talked about indirectly through the issue of Indigenous family violence. This has made the task of obtaining accurate data on sexual assault difficult, and has contributed to the secrecy and acceptance of the issue. Furthermore, it has also allowed the prevalence of Indigenous sexual assault to remain hidden.

## Historical and traditional contexts

One of the most important aspects of working with Indigenous survivors of sexual assault is understanding the cultural heritage and history of trauma that Indigenous Australians have experienced.

The issue of generations of Indigenous women being survivors of sexual assault is often reported. What has not been made clear is whether this was an historical issue or a result of colonial processes, with sexual assault having been perpetrated by white colonists (as clearly stated in previous reports) (Robertson, 2000). It has been claimed that sexual assault has historically been a cultural right of passage for Indigenous people, but in traditional lore, practices are carefully monitored, and the use of sexual assault against women and particularly children was punishable by tribal lore, not condoned by it. The lack of education about sexual assault, and the compounding effects of colonisation, contribute to the normalisation and acceptance of violence in some contemporary Indigenous communities. Brokering solutions to working with Indigenous communities would enable the transition to an integrated and sustainable process of change.

## Intergenerational trauma

### Intergenerational trauma

Historical trauma is trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time; it extends beyond the life span. Historical trauma response has been identified and is delineated as a constellation of features in reaction to the multigenerational, collective, historical, and cumulative psychic wounding over time, both over the life span and across generations (Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995; Brave Heart, in press a). Mourning that has not been completed and the ensuing depression are absorbed by children from birth on (Shoshan, 1989). (Duran, Duran, Brave Heart, & Horse-Davis, 1998, p. 342)

Aboriginal history since colonisation has been one of profound trauma, resulting in a sense of powerlessness and multigenerational grief that is experienced both within and across Aboriginal communities throughout Australia (Zubrick et al., 2004). This “cycle” continues, resulting in the transmission of intergenerational trauma that has been sustained over generations. Combined with the sheer physical stress required for the survival of an entire cultural group, this has taken a very significant toll and continues to create crises. The results of this cumulative process may consist of layers of trauma from colonisation onwards, and contributes to contemporary problems facing Indigenous communities, such as poor health, alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, pornography, unemployment, poor education and housing, and general disempowerment. These issues can lead to further family and other violence (Atkinson, 2002).

The layers of trauma that exist for communities, families and individuals are so great that working therapeutically with the trauma often becomes too hard. Crisis situations become so ingrained for survivors that all too soon they forget what it was like to live without trauma—or a crisis on a daily basis. When this starts to become part of their psyche, the survivors may find that the initial trauma becomes a secondary factor to crisis management and everyday survival.

This can leave many survivors vulnerable to being revictimised as adults, in particular through sexual assault and/or violence/abuse such as domestic and family violence. It may also mean that a significant proportion of Indigenous women accessing adult sexual assault services also have a history of child sexual abuse or abuse of another form. This cycle of abuse leaves the most damaging of effects: the loss of the “self”, which includes self-esteem, self-confidence, self-pride and self-identification. To break the cycle

of abuse requires an education component that challenges the normalisation of abuse.

Further research needs to be performed by Indigenous researchers to define the long-term impact of these issues on Indigenous survivors in particular. Such research would need to work within a culturally and community acceptable framework.

## Kinship systems, family and community contexts

Indigenous women continue to remain a marginalised and isolated group. Many survivors find it difficult to access mainstream services. Without support and guidance from other women within their family and/or communities, many survivors would continue to be subjected to regular assaults and/or abuse.

### Kinship systems and intrafamilial abuse

#### Intrafamilial abuse and family violence

The term “family violence” has become widely adopted as part of the shift towards addressing intra-familial violence in all its forms, including child abuse and neglect, rather than taking a focus on a particular form of intra-familial violence. Family violence is widely seen as the term that “best encompasses the various forms of violence that may take place between family members. It is the most inclusive term, and is capable of encompassing changing ideas about what ‘family’ means in late 20th century Australia” (DVIRC, 1998:36). (Tomison, 2000, p. 2)

Indigenous family violence includes the immediate or nuclear family, extended family and/or community.

Kinship systems are pivotal for Indigenous communities. This can contribute to internal conflicts for the survivor, particularly if the abuse they have been subjected to is intrafamilial. The sense of betrayal of kinship experienced by the survivor that is brought about by disclosure can have a significant impact on their decisions, sometimes into their adulthood.

If their decision is to leave and cut ties with the family, this will often result in a grieving process for the loss, and separation from the family group. Survivors may find themselves more vulnerable, and align with another group or support base in which they strive for acceptance, usually through destructive behaviours.

Within Indigenous cultures, people identify or introduce themselves by acknowledging their clan or family group and their country. This process becomes problematic when a disclosure against a family member

is made public; either the survivor will not identify their family or the family will disown them.

Alternatively, many survivors remain connected to their family and never disclose or speak about the abuse, allowing it to remain secret—it becomes the “white elephant” in the room. This allows the survivor to maintain support and sense of belonging within the family.

Intrafamilial abuse can also involve a threat of violence by the perpetrator, either directly to the survivor or through other family members, usually aimed at younger siblings. This sets up a safety issue for survivors to consider and a great sense of responsibility to protect others. Survivors are left wondering if there will be a lack of support offered and the greater fear of not being believed or protected.

Culturally appropriate and competent services are an essential requirement; this would enable Indigenous sexual assault survivors to have access to key and vital services. By being empowered in this process, the survivor would be able to engage in the service and select the level of assistance required to resolve and heal the trauma experienced from a sexual assault.

## Differences between Western and Indigenous styles of service provision

Indigenous people are not a homogenous group, which makes it difficult to provide specific guidelines on how to work in a culturally appropriate manner. Some of the common themes or advice given for service provision for Indigenous survivors should be tried and guided by the survivor rather than the agency or professional.

### *Differences in values*

As identified by Karpfen (1997), the main differences are outlined in four keys areas of core values. Within Western culture, the core values are of individualism and consumerism, and are both secular and conflictual. Generally, these values come from a Western (particularly Anglo-Celtic) philosophical position.

The Western style of service delivery incorporates the use of clinical-based intervention, often imposed by an external influence. This would include having counselling sessions in an office environment and with just the professional and the survivor. Most non-Indigenous people are identified by Indigenous people as power figures, regardless of their position, thus setting up an unequal power balance from the outset for Indigenous survivors, and in an unfamiliar environment.

Within Indigenous cultures, the core values are spiritual, ecological, consensual and communal (Karpfen, 1997). Our core values are centred on the

wellbeing of the community and family. Indigenous survivors are more accustomed and comfortable with informal and inclusive processes on a local or community level, which allows the survivor to include their own supports and in an environment that is non-confrontational.

### Relationship to land and spirit

Indigenous culture has a significant relationship to land—the connection through spirit to the land is central to the being of Indigenous people. There is a belief that Indigenous people were created from the land (our mother) and will return to the land after death (the life-death-life cycle) and again be reborn. The spiritual connection to land (our country) is a continuation of the cultural identity for Indigenous people.

### *Differences in language*

English is sometimes a second or even third language of many Indigenous women, particularly in regional and remote areas of Australia. This creates a significant barrier in accessing any services, particularly sexual assault services. The use of Indigenous languages should include dialects used in different areas and also pidgin English, which is often misinterpreted and not taken into account when referring or servicing Indigenous survivors.

### *Culturally appropriate service provision*

### Culturally appropriate

Effective and culturally appropriate intervention for sexual assault would need to “address both the past traumas and present situational problems and health disadvantages of Indigenous communities” (Stanley et al., 2002, p. 57). This enables alternative ways of working with Indigenous people in all areas of service delivery “to ensure that services are technically competent, coordinated, integrated, flexible and accessible” (Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 35, as cited in Stanley et al., 2002, p. 57).

### Culturally secure

Cultural security allows the use of culture protocols and ways of working. These can include roles, responsibilities, cultural identity and practices allowing the protection and continuation of Indigenous culture. This enables the strengthening of individual family and community capacity, creating safe environments, and building sustainable environments (Fitzgerald, 2001, as cited in Stanley et al., 2002, p. 57).

Encouraging Indigenous survivors to use and engage in sexual assault services should involve applying the same principles and opportunities as all other cultural groups, but with special consideration to Indigenous people's historical and contemporary experiences.

Because Indigenous people are not a homogenous group—with the diversity ranging from different clan and language groups, to different beliefs and practices—it becomes difficult to provide a set of guidelines or a model when working with Indigenous survivors. Pre-colonisation, over 700 language groups existed in Australia. Through the process of assimilation, many groups have been brought into areas where they have been forced to co-habit with other Indigenous groups. Regional and remote areas contain more traditional Indigenous people who have strong cultural beliefs and practices, which differs from more urban settings, such as in regional centres and large cities. Presenting barriers may include language and cultural protocols, coupled with a lack of services and a highly transient Indigenous population. Again, this makes it difficult to provide information for a one-size-fits-all approach.

A “testing process” is done by most Indigenous survivors when first accessing a sexual assault service—a process to test the flexibility and accessibility of the service and the individual professional. The issues of concern can range from confidentiality of a client's contacts, crisis management issues, appointment schedules, and information offered about other Indigenous specific services. Cultural appropriateness will be crucial to whether the survivor engages with the service.

### ***Balancing power: Viewing culturally appropriate service provision as a learning process for the professional***

My observations have been that working with Indigenous survivors presents an opportunity for professionals to enter the learning process on an equal playing field. The professionals would need to become aware of their own biases, stereotypes, values and assumptions about human behaviour, particularly in relation to Indigenous people, and take action to deal with these.

This process needs to be entered into consciously or it may frustrate and confuse the professional and leave the survivor wondering why they are not the focal point of contact. The professional must become aware that survivors of different cultural backgrounds may have different views, values and beliefs from theirs. This is a continual learning process and requires the professional to be open to a communication and engagement process that may challenge their normally accepted values.

In order to develop appropriate helping practices, intervention strategies and structures that take into account the survivor's historical, cultural and environmental context, the professional must collaborate with the survivor or family group with whom they are working. This will ensure, again, that the power balance is equal and an open learning exchange takes place, and that processes that are developed are done so in collaboration and are appropriate for that particular group.

Another key component of a survivor's engagement is the level of confidentiality within the agency and of the information exchanged with the professional. This includes cultural advice sought by the agency or professional (for example from local community elders or other service providers), which should not take place unless the survivor has given permission for this to take place and feels in control of the process.

Understanding and the acknowledgement of cultural protocols then become integral in the survivor feeling confident and familiar with accessing services.

The provision of information needs to take place at a pace with which the survivor is comfortable. This allows the initial engagement of the survivor and follow-up process to be a smoother and more engaging process for both parties. This can be challenging in some service delivery areas, as most of them are based on appointment times and schedules.

### ***Indigenous sexual assault workers***

Many agencies employ an Indigenous sexual assault worker or liaison officer, particularly those operating in areas with a larger Indigenous population. The concept of having an Indigenous person to deal with all the Indigenous clientele is problematic. Some Indigenous sexual assault survivors would prefer not to see another Indigenous person, as this could compromise the survivors' confidentiality.

It may be more beneficial to utilise an Indigenous worker to engage other agencies or raise the profile of the agency in the Indigenous community. In all instances, it takes time for the community to build a relationship of trust with agencies and professionals, including Indigenous people from another area. This process of building a relationship of trust will also be beneficial in assisting the agency in future strategic planning and evaluation of their service delivery to Indigenous communities.

### ***Indigenous artwork***

The commissioning of Indigenous artwork is another factor that agencies may like to explore. Hanging artwork in the foyer or using it in graphic designs on brochures or posters is another approach that requires

extensive consultation with local communities. The use of wording in the brochures would need to be approved by a community-based consultative group and the artwork deemed acceptable to articulate the issue.

### *Informal meetings and home visits*

The options of informal meetings or home visits are commonly requested by Indigenous survivors. Significant barriers for survivors relating to child care, finance and lack of access to public transport may prevent many agencies engaging Indigenous survivors. Informal meetings and home visits enable the survivor to gain information and engage with the service without feeling judged or isolated. The outreaching of service delivery could also possibly alleviate resourcing issues for services.

### *Co-location of services*

The “one-stop shop” model is an extension of this concept, where family support or specialist antiviolenence services are co-located. This allows the further development and fostering of collaborative relationships and the model has been well received in rural communities (Tomison & Poole, 2000).

To provide a flexible and comfortable environment for Indigenous survivors, including children and family in the services will increase knowledge for all parties, and enable the engagement of the survivor and family in an easier and more comfortable process.

Families often fear the stigma attached to using family support services. Breton (1985) identified the need to locate preventative or family support services near other facilities so that members of the community do not feel stigmatised when walking into the agency.

### *Holistic service provision*

Indigenous culture encourages holistic family servicing to occur without the division of perpetrators and survivors. If the perpetrator is Indigenous, the use of the service would require an assessment of the survivor’s safety, and that of their family. Most survivors will have great concern for the welfare of their children and immediate family members, in some instances placing their wellbeing before their own.

Indigenous communities are small and close networks; the survivor’s personal information and inaccurate gossip about the sexual assault may be discussed publicly, which may create further issues such as family feuding.

As within most sectors, funding shortages and cutbacks result in several gaps in allocated resources for sexual assault services. The use of collaborative and shared resources may minimise the impact of re-

traumatisation (retelling their experience) on survivors and allow holistic servicing for sexual assault.

Sharing and collaborating with other Indigenous agencies and programs is beneficial, but it should always remain the choice of the survivor whether to contact and participate and engage in service provision. This process cannot be assumed as, for example, the perpetrator’s or survivor’s family may work at or also access that service.

## **Good practice in culturally appropriate service provision**

Many agencies have taken a keen interest in and entered into shared partnership arrangements with Indigenous communities to serve the needs of Indigenous sexual assault survivors. Some examples of good practice include the Aboriginal Healing Project, administered through the WA Department of Health and funded through the Australian Government, and the Strong Families Programs, administered through the WA Department of Child Protection. The models adopted by these programs encourage the inclusion of whole families and communities in addressing this complex issue and they are conducted through a culturally appropriate and secure framework. The programs act as an enabler for communities to engage other key stakeholders in working towards sustainable change.

## **Recommendations**

The need for culturally appropriate services are of great importance in attempting to work with already debilitating levels of trauma that exist in Indigenous communities. I would like to recommend that mainstream agencies make a considerable and conscious effort to make their services to Indigenous survivors as appropriate as possible. In doing so, I would also like to make the following recommendations:

- *An equal partnership of cultural exchange.* Mainstream and Indigenous-specific agencies need to be involved in an equal partnership of cultural exchange, using the resources of both in a complementary and empowering process rather than a competing one.
- *Cultural appropriateness should include cultural empowerment.* Empowerment includes ensuring choice for survivors regarding the type and level of their engagement in services for healing from sexual assault. Choice of intervention by the survivor allows control by the survivor, and does not limit their use to one or another service. This relates to the use of both mainstream and Indigenous services.
- *Encouraging holistic service provision.* Including and valuing Indigenous communities when working with Indigenous survivors further enhances a model for sustainable change. This is in a similar

vein to Canadian developments based on self-determination by Indigenous people, where far greater control over matters affecting young people is given to the Indigenous community (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000). "This, in turn, has led to the adoption of holistic prevention strategies with a focus on 'whole of community' approaches and early intervention strategies designed to influence a broad network of relationships and processes within the family and across the wider community" (Tomison & Wise, 1999). This approach recognises the importance of the local community and the wider social and economic environment for the wellbeing of community members. It recognises the special protective role that strong communities can have for children, and the importance of supporting families to care for their members.

## Summary

- Historical and contemporary aspects of trauma must be taken in to context.
- One size doesn't fit all for Indigenous sexual assault survivors.
- Encourage the use of alternative ways of servicing and working with survivors.
- Allow the power balance to be equal between all parties.
- Undertake evaluation of your service for Indigenous people.
- Engage Indigenous communities in the processes for service change.

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