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Protecting the Sacred Tree: Conceptualizing Spiritual Abuse Against Native American Elders

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Current definitions of elder abuse and neglect include physical, sexual, financial, emotional, and psychological dimensions. Such definitions overlook the spiritual lives of elders. Acknowledging and understanding spiritual abuse may be incredibly important for Native American Elder communities. Abuse of Native American elders can be detrimental on individual, communal, and cultural levels given that elders possess important cultural knowledge and are considered highly respected within indigenous communities. This article outlines the historical context of spiritual abuse within Native American communities and reviews the spiritual abuse literature in order to develop a culturally appropriate definition of spiritual abuse. Components of spiritual abuse include abuse from a trusted spiritual leader or mentor, limitations of access to sacred objects of ceremonial practice, and contamination of sacred objects or practice. Examples of spiritual abuse components are provided within both Native American spirituality as well as other modes of spiritual practice. Components of this definition can be utilized by health professionals, researchers, and tribal governments intending to develop culturally appropriate responses to elder abuse.

Keywords: spiritual abuse, Native American spirituality, elder abuse, Native American elders

It was said that a day will come when the people will wake up, as if from a long, drug sleep: that they will begin to search again for the Sacred Tree. They will be timid at first, but little by little, they will understand how important this search is.

The location of the tree and its fruits have been carefully guarded and preserved in the minds and hearts of wise elders and leaders. These humble and loving souls will guide anyone who is honestly and sincerely looking for the path leading to the protecting shadow and fruits of the Sacred Tree.

-The Story of the Sacred Tree (Bopp, Bopp, Lane, & Peter, 1988)

The Sacred Tree is a source of spiritual healing. It symbolizes protection, nourishment, growth, and wholeness. Elders serve an important role in the protection of and guidance toward the Sacred Tree. Spiritual abuse threatens the health of the Sacred Tree. One

cannot understand the Sacred Tree without understanding Mother Earth, the sun, the water, and the air. It is just as important to understand spiritual abuse within the context of American Indian¹ individuals and communities. It is essential to consider how spiritual abuse fits within the larger context of spiritual and cultural beliefs, as well as the historical and ongoing traumatic effects of colonization. Defining spiritual abuse means placing a name on the experiences of many American Indian elders and understanding the impact on their spiritual and communal lives. This paper provides a conceptual outline of spiritual abuse by integrating literature on American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) spirituality, history, and elder abuse.

Elder abuse affects all cultures and communities but has a unique impact in Indian Country² and other indigenous commu-

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¹ American Indian refers to those belonging to tribes in the lower 48 states of the United States. There are at this date 567 federally recognized tribes and Alaskan villages in the U.S. There are also several hundred more state recognized or unrecognized tribes. Recognition is a state or federal designation that entitles members of that tribe to certain benefits based upon treaties.

² Indian Country is a legal term in "U.S. Code, Title 18, Part I, Chapter 53 §1151 meaning (a) all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government, (b) all dependent Indian communities within the borders of the United States whether within the original or subsequently acquired territory thereof, and whether within or without the limits of a state, and (c) all Indian allotments, the Indian titles to which have not been extinguished, including rights-of-way running through the same." Many times this reference is to any area where American Indians live today. It is also relevant in determining jurisdiction for legal matters such as elder abuse. (U.S. Code, 2012)

nities. Elder abuse, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is “committed through various tactics including physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, as well as financial abuse, neglect, and denial of rights” (World Health Organization, 2008). There is little written about elder abuse in AI/AN tribal communities. Due to the lack of standard definitions across tribes, contextual examples and stories are most often used to describe and define incidences of elder abuse. Elder abuse definitions in tribal codes are similar but vary. Examples are the definitions written in the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Code of Justice Title XXI and in the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Tribal Code, section 56–06-02. They are, respectively:

[A]ny act done intentionally, willfully, or in knowing disregard of the possible consequences of such actions that results in physical injury or pain, mental injury or anguish, unreasonable confinement, malnutrition, financial exploitation, or the deprivation of necessary services to maintain the physical health or mental health of the elder. (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, 2009)

Abuse means the willful infliction of physical injury or pain, sexual abuse, mental anguish, unreasonable confinement, intimidation, financial exploitation, the willful deprivation by a caretaker of the basic necessities of life; such as but not limited to food, shelter, clothing, and personal care which are necessary to prevent physical harm, mental anguish, or mental illness, or any other type of maltreatment. However, no person shall be deemed to be abused for the sole reason that they are being furnished traditional remedial treatment by spiritual means through prayer alone in accordance with their religious beliefs. (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, 1986)

Within Indian Country, elder abuse signals a “cultural paradox” that defies the traditional view and role of elders in the community (Smyer & Clark, 2011). Elders are highly revered and respected members of society because of their experiences, knowledge of cultural traditions, and profound wisdom that is passed onto younger generations through healing, dreaming, and teachings. As such, elders are the primary teachers and educators in their communities (Smyer & Clark). The safety and integrity of elders becomes essential when considering that 80% of American Indian culture is contained within language and 20% is contained within nonverbal life experiences (Brown, 2014, p. 51). Elders teach traditions orally, suggesting that the loss of elders who speak the language contributes to the loss of culture (Brown, 2014; LaDue, 1994). The damage to the spiritual life of elders via spiritual abuse may influence the transmission of spiritual practices to younger generations.

In order to understand possible generational impacts of spiritual abuse, it is important to acknowledge and understand the history of spiritual oppression within the history of American Indian experiences. Spiritual oppression is oppression of a spiritual practice with the intent to extinguish spiritual beliefs and practices. Long-standing, systematic oppression from colonization, boarding schools, and redistricting of tribes has disrupted access to traditional spiritual practice. Such oppression impedes opportunities to actively engage in one’s spiritual life. Boarding schools denied students of their cultural beliefs and resulted in a direct loss of spiritual wisdom, such as stories, languages, and ceremonies. Historical attempts to uproot and eliminate American Indian cultures frequently went to extreme measures, such as forced sterilization of young women during routine medical procedures (Law-

rence, 2000). Systemic oppression not only manifested in direct attempts to keep American Indian culture and spirituality from thriving, it also extended to efforts to acquire American Indian resources. Several examples include manifest destiny, establishment of treaties, the reservation systems, and most recently the Dakota Access Pipeline. Consistent efforts by the government to dismantle the rights and cultural integrity of American Indian people reflects a cultural genocide resulting in historical trauma.

The historical trauma and cultural genocide of Native Americans³ and First Nations of the North American Continent are large factors in their unresolved grief. Gone (2009) suggested that historical trauma accounts for the multigenerational effects of distress that continue to impact contemporary indigenous peoples. In order to cope with persistent forced assimilation, American Indians shifted into survival mode, which impacted their ability to adapt in their culturally known ways (Brown, 2014). Experiences of colonization, forced acculturation in boarding schools, prohibition of spiritual practices, and establishment of the residential and treaty system resulted in losses of indigenous language, spirituality, ceremonies, and traditional parenting practices.

Duran and Duran (1995) conceptualized the culmination of this historical trauma as a “soul wound.” The long-term effects of historical trauma transmit across generations through internalization of elder abuse, alcoholism, child abuse, suicide, and domestic violence (Duran and Duran, p. 35). For example, during a study of historical trauma, one member of the Lakota tribe described being sexually abused by his parents who were enrolled in boarding schools as children (Braveheart & Horse, 2000, p. 254). Such examples mark the recapitulation of trauma across generations, resulting in the loss of traditional American Indian means of parenting. Mourning the impact of a “soul wound” can only be accomplished when there is access to culturally known ways of mourning. Brave Heart explained that the historical denial of cultural practices around mourning creates unresolved grief reflected in a chronic disconnection with the spirit world (p. 248). As such, spiritual abuse occurring within American Indian communities can be directly understood as a manifestation of historical trauma.

Understanding the Importance of Spirituality

Conceptualizing spirituality may help clarify the meaning of spiritual abuse. However, spirituality as a term tends to be misunderstood. Many people associate the term with monks tucked away in foreign temples, while others perceive spirituality as mystical, holy, pious, or something that is “optional” (Lavalley, 2001). A person’s preconceived notions of spirituality may impact his or her perception of what constitutes spiritual abuse. This is especially important when understanding American Indian spirituality.

Colonization corresponded with an emphasis on Christianity. Early colonists demonized American Indian spirituality. The demonization of American Indian spirituality served as a justification for violence and destruction of sacred objects (Mihsuah, 1996). During the 1920s, stereotypes of American Indian spirituality as

³ Native American as used in the article indicates the indigenous people of the United States including American Indian tribes, Alaskan villages, and Hawaiian homesteads.

evil or demonic led to American Indian spiritual practices being outlawed (Bigfoot & Braden, 1998). AI/AN spiritual practices remained illegal until challenged in 1978 when the Supreme Court overturned the prohibition and Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (PL92-469) ensuring religious freedom for American Indians, Eskimos, Aleuts, and Native Hawaiians (Lyons et al., 1992, p. 306).

Demonic stereotypes of American Indian spirituality have diminished. Unfortunately, cultural misappropriation replaced such stereotypes. Cultural misappropriation is a form of spiritual exploitation that connotes taking, claiming, and/or stealing indigenous spiritual practices and customs for one's own benefit. For example, fraudulently identifying oneself as approved and capable of conducting a sacred ceremony and receiving payment for leading the ceremony would be considered cultural misappropriation. An upsurge of cultural misappropriation of American Indian spirituality occurred in the 1980s when American Indian culture was commercialized through self-help books and workshops facilitated by nonindigenous persons (Aldred, 2000). Such commercialization trivialized American Indian spirituality as merely talking with spirits. Nonindigenous people profited from a distilled and inaccurate version of American Indian spiritual beliefs without permission from American Indian people. Despite both cultural misappropriation and stereotypes, American Indian spirituality has remained a resilient factor within indigenous culture (Bigfoot & Braden, 1998).

Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) explained that scholars often lack agreement on definitions of spirituality. Definitions often contrast spirituality with religion. Vaughan (1991) defined spirituality as primarily reflecting the subjective experience of the sacred, whereas religion reflects doctrine (p. 105). Others conceptualize religion as reflective of ceremony attendance and spirituality as reflective of personal beliefs (Good & Willoughby, 2006). It is important to note that the meaning inherent in identifying as religious or spiritual will likely vary across cultures and individuals. For example, Bigfoot and Braden (1998) explained that for many American Indians, religion may be closely associated with the boarding school era. Boarding schools aimed to eradicate American Indian spiritual and cultural values and replace them with Euro American Christian values. As a byproduct, many American Indians perceive religion in a negative light, while others continue to practice both traditional American Indian spiritual practices and Christianity.

Religion and spirituality intersect. In application, people must balance subjective interpretation and derived meaning with expected doctrine and practice. This intersection emphasizes the importance of how religion interacts with spirituality to guide the creation of spiritual meaning. For example, deciding to wait until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse is a commonly known component of Catholicism. This component only becomes an extension of one's spiritual life when an individual identifies waiting to have intercourse until marriage as essential to his or her spiritual integrity. This meaning may not be replicated among all Catholics.

Integration of religion and spirituality can look different for American Indian individuals identifying with more traditional forms of American Indian spirituality. For example, American Indian spirituality focuses on the notion of a righteous life (Brown, 2014). Religions such as Catholicism include sacred texts that

delineate an objective picture of righteousness through documents such as the Ten Commandments. American Indian spirituality departs from this by emphasizing congruence within oneself and connection to the Creator (Brown, 2014). The practice of this spiritual integration is incorporated through stories, sacred rituals, and ceremonies. Ceremonies allow reconnection with the spiritual dimension to cultivate a natural life that honors and feels congruent with the Creator (Brown). Determining which ceremony and whether to participate in order to grow depends on the individual and the cultural context.

For the purpose of understanding spiritual abuse, spirituality is defined as the interworking between an individual's subjective experience and beliefs about his or her connection to the world and/or a higher power. Specifically, "spirituality encompasses religious beliefs and practices, as well as a sense of self in relation to the natural world" (Bigfoot & Braden, 1998, section 5, p. 13). Inherent in this definition is the implication that one can derive a more meaningful understanding of his or her being through interconnection with a higher power or other entities. Damage to this core personal connection can produce grave existential and psychological consequences.

It is not only important to understand spirituality in general terms, but it is also essential to understand how American Indian individuals and communities conceptualize spirituality. Learning sacred spiritual knowledge is considered a privilege within American Indian communities (Brown, 2014). The sacredness of spiritual knowledge means that spiritual wisdom is transmitted orally. Further, the oral tradition of spirituality creates unique spiritual beliefs that fluctuate among tribes. Wide-ranging spiritual customs among tribes implies that elements of spiritual abuse will also differ.

American Indian communities view spirituality as an energy that keeps humanity connected with each other, the Creator, and Mother Earth (Lavalley, 2001, p. 113). Lavalley (2001) goes on to say that spirituality is inherent. Spiritual energy contains an individual's essence, the universe, and the Creator generating strength to move forward in life by seeking a vision for developing into healthy and wholesome beings. Spiritual health includes healthy self-image, self-esteem, and self-respect that comes from the core: the sacredness of human spirit given by the Creator.

Spirituality can serve as an important source of resiliency within the lives of elders in the realms of mental health (Meisenhelder & Chandler, 2000), suicide (Garrouette et al., 2013), and terminal illness (Pentz, 2005). Meisenhelder and Chandler (2000) found that while age and social support related to health outcomes, faith had the highest impact on mental health. Garrouette et al. found a positive association between commitment to cultural spirituality and a reduction in attempted suicides within a sample of American Indian individuals. When elderly cancer patients faced the ends of their lives, spiritually oriented elders felt less fear and more acceptance of death when compared to their nonspiritual counterparts (Pentz, 2005). Taken together, these studies strongly suggest that spiritual orientation can serve as an important protective factor related to stress for both elders and American Indian populations. Spiritual trauma and wounding cuts to the core of a person's belief system, his or her internal strength accrued from faith, and his or her overall resiliency to deal with life and even survival.

Spiritual Abuse

Spirituality is considered a core component of an individual's holistic health, yet definitions of elder abuse do not mention spiritual abuse. One of the difficulties in addressing spiritual abuse is the lack of a conceptual framework to understand what behaviors constitute spiritual abuse. This is essential for creating a working definition that can be implemented both within the context of federal policies and tribal government. There are few definitions for spiritual abuse in the literature, making an agreed upon definition elusive. Nicloy (2006) offers one definition of spiritual abuse as an abuse that damages an individual's core or "mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment" (p. 4). Dehan and Levi (2009) described spiritual abuse within spousal relationships as "any attempt to impair the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being" (p. 1300). Gunderson (2006) defined spiritual abuse within American Indian communities as occurring between a leader and victim and involving "misuse of the healing process to illicit pleasure and/or ego gratification" (p. 30). Such definitions speak to the common impact of the abuse damaging an individual's spiritual integrity. However, manifestations of abuse may vary on the context of the abuse and cultural experience of the individual. The following section outlines components of spiritual abuse.

Components of Spiritual Abuse

For the purposes of this conceptual article, we are defining spiritual abuse as actions that damage one's subjective experience and personal practice of the sacred, creating a severe disconnection with a higher power or other spiritual sources of meaning and resulting in harm to one's spiritual integrity, lack of access to spiritual resources to cope, and/or an inability to pursue spiritual growth. Unlike discrimination based on religion and spirituality (e.g., denial of access to spiritual rites in the workplace), spiritual abuse typically occurs within interpersonal relationships. We conceptualize forms of spiritual abuse as including (a) abuse from trusted spiritual leaders or mentors, (b) limitations of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice, and (c) contamination of sacred objects or practice.

Just as spiritual abuse can be conceptualized in broader terms, it is more likely that manifestations of spiritual abuse are entangled within an individual's cultural experience. As such, it is important to understand the impact of spiritual abuse within the context of cultural and spiritual practices. This section will define and provide examples of each type of spiritual abuse, focusing on the experiences of American Indian elders while simultaneously drawing parallels to spiritual abuse literature within other spiritual paradigms. It is important to note that due to variability among tribes regarding spiritual beliefs, examples reflecting American Indian spiritual life may not be generalizable to all tribes.

Abuse of power from a leader or trusted mentor. Abuse of power from a leader or trusted mentor occurs when an individual uses his or her position within a religious community or organization to exploit another individual physically, sexually, emotionally, or financially. A key feature of this sort of abuse is that the perpetrator's intended function within the community is to help the victim deepen his or her spiritual practice. Because of the perpe-

trator's position of power and function as a spiritual guide, the abuse directly impacts an individual's spirituality and belief system. Consistent with our proposed definition of spiritual abuse, abuse from a spiritual leader creates a lack of access to spiritual resources and disconnection from one's spiritual life that can manifest in doubting one's beliefs or worth.

Some of the most prominent cases of this type of spiritual abuse occurred when a number of priests within the Catholic Church sexually abused children serving as altar servers. In the wake of the many cases of sexual abuse committed by Catholic priests, empirical investigations have sought to examine the unique impact of experiencing abuse at the hands of a religious leader. Studies suggest that adult survivors of abuse experience less trust in God when compared to adults who had not experienced any abuse (Rossetti, 1995). Mart (2004) found that of a sample of 25 children abused by priests, only one continued to maintain a belief in God. These examples suggest that abuse from a spiritual leader may contribute to a unique loss of faith or belief.

Abuse from spiritual leaders is not exclusive to the Catholic Church and has been described within American Indian communities. Rendon (1997) detailed an instance of an elder utilizing his power to obtain sexual favors from women. These experiences were marked by coercion, through making promises of increased importance within the eyes of the spirits, threats of using sacred medicine against victims, and creating backlash if the victim spoke out. In a recent qualitative survey of American Indian elders, the elders expressed concern about healers utilizing their power in exploitive ways and referring to offenders as "wounded healers" (Gunderson, 2006). These dynamics share similarities to the secrecy tactics employed by Catholic priests (Mart, 2004) but also demonstrate forgiveness and recognition of the need for healing, which is valued within the American Indian culture. Abuse described by Rendon also included financial exploitation in the forms of leaders expecting gifts in order to continue "spiritual work" (p. 3). Spiritual abuse from leaders overlaps with other forms of abuse, such as sexual (Rossetti, 1995; Mart) and financial (Rendon), but the impact is uniquely on the spiritual life on the victim (Rossetti; Rendon; Mart).

Limitations of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice. Limitations of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice occurs when an individual prevents someone from utilizing a sacred object through neglect, intentionally disregarding requests to attend ceremonies or use sacred objects, or actively denying an individual access to a sacred object or ceremony. Limited access to sacred objects may also occur by taking a sacred object from an individual without permission or by neglecting to provide opportunities to retrieve materials needed for spiritual practice, such as tobacco, sage, or other medicines and items such as drums and sacred pipes. Lack of access to ceremonies can occur by actively preventing an individual from going to the ceremonies or refusal to assist an elder attending a ceremony. Unlike abuse of power from a spiritual leader or trusted mentor, limiting access can be perpetrated by a significant other of either gender, a family member, community member, helping professional, or neighbor.

Few studies shed light on how denial of access to spiritual ceremonies and sacred objects constitutes spiritual abuse. When exploring the experiences of Haredi Jewish women, Dehan and Levi (2009) found two elements of spiritual abuse that fit within this category: prevention of the performance of spiritual acts and

prompting a woman to neglect her spiritual duties. Haredi Jewish women described being unable to purchase the necessary yeast needed to prepare bread for Shabbat (p. 1301). While this instance may appear like financial control, baking bread for Shabbat is a component of a Haredi woman's spiritual practice. While the means may be financial control, the action directly impacts her spiritual life and her ability to derive satisfaction from an aspect of her spiritual practice.

Elder abuse overlaps with experiences of financial exploitation when ceremonial objects are taken from an American Indian elder's home (Gray, 2013). Within markets, these items are highly sought after and can be sold for large sums of money. The monetary value of selling sacred objects may appear financially abusive, but the sacred nature of the object does harm beyond financial distress. Oftentimes sacred objects are priceless items passed down from generation to generation. Such objects may be passed on during times of hardship to find power and support. For example, a ceremonial pipe can be used for daily prayers. When these objects are sold, an elder can no longer engage in prayer the same way. Being unable to engage in these prayers could directly damage an elder's spiritual life. This particular type of abuse could be implemented by the widest range of relationships, including significant others, family members, helping professions, friends, or strangers.

This type of spiritual abuse also includes limiting access to ceremonies and places of worship. Women within abusive relationships described access to church services as a means to gain support for coping with the abuse (Hancock, Ames, & Behnke, 2014). Preventing access then serves as a means for the perpetrator to control his or her partner and limit access to supportive others, but it also impacts an individual's spiritual life. Not only does limitation to ceremony attendance prevent spiritual fulfillment, but in some faiths, it might create additional negative implications. For example, within the Catholic faith it is considered a mortal sin to miss Mass. While not all Catholics subscribe to this belief, for an individual who believes missing Mass is a mortal sin, preventing him/her from going to Mass may negatively influence his or her standing in the eyes of God. Because this specific form of abuse implies that the perpetrator is in a formal caretaking role or significant relationship, it is most likely to be perpetrated by significant others, family members in caretaking roles, or helping professionals.

Limitations of access to sacred objects or ceremonies may be an important consideration for American Indian elders. Some elders may be unable to transport themselves to ceremonies due to a lack of transportation or physical ailments, such as being in a wheelchair or suffering from chronic fatigue. This creates a situation in which American Indian elders appear at a higher likelihood to experience spiritual abuse through a lack of access to ceremonies. When the death of a loved one occurs within the Ojibway tribe, an individual mourns by wearing somber clothing (Johnston, 1976). On the anniversary of the deceased's passing, the community engages in a feast that marks the end of the mourning period (Johnston). If an elder is denied an opportunity to attend a feast of death, he or she may struggle to transition out of mourning.

It is important to note this particular type of spiritual abuse has direct implications for the community. When elders cannot attend ceremonies, the spiritual health of the community suffers because elders are unable to share their wisdom and visions. For example,

powwows offer social connection and the opportunity to teach ceremonies (Rybak, Eastin, & Robbins, 2004). If an elder cannot attend a powwow due to spiritual abuse, he or she may miss out on hearing his or her language, participating in ceremonies, and teaching younger members traditions. The drumbeat at the powwow can be understood as the heartbeat of the spirit. Being able to connect to this heartbeat within the context of a community gathering is an important facet of both an elder's and community's health.

Connection to traditional versus westernized culture may have an impact on how spirituality is expressed and experienced (Brown, 2014). Brown refers to these dimensions as worldviews. When conceptualizing these worldviews in terms of spirituality, Brown explained that expressions of these worldviews fall within spectrums ranging from agreement with original tribal beliefs to no exposure to tribal beliefs or consistent organized religious practice of typical "western" belief systems to limited practice (p.29). Spiritual abuse can occur at any end of the spectrum of those worldviews. Access to spirituality through sacred objects or ceremony can intersect with these worldviews. Gray (2013) explained that spiritual abuse can occur for elders raised outside of the community but desiring a connection or end-of-life ceremonies.

Contamination of sacred objects or practice. Contamination of sacred objects or practice bears similarity to limitation of access in that it impacts an individual's ability to derive satisfaction from practice. Contamination of a sacred object can occur when individuals touch or use a sacred object without permission. This particular component constitutes spiritual abuse through degrading the sacred nature of an object or spiritual integrity of a practice.

This can also occur when tribal traditions dictating how sacred objects should be handled are disrespected. For example, in some tribal cultures, it is considered inappropriate for a woman to touch a sacred eagle feather when menstruating. Touching a sacred object in this scenario would impact the spiritual integrity of the object directly impacting one's practice. However, this example may not generalize to all tribes. As such, it is important that definitions of spiritual abuse are flexible enough to capture the wide range of cultural practice across tribes and other religions. Another example would be a medicine bundle being touched by someone other than the owner. When elders travel today, searches by TSA require a year of ceremony and cleansing to reestablish the power of the bundle. This impacts the prayers and ceremonies that elder can do for the period of purification.

When a sacred object is contaminated, there may be misfortune for the owner. For example, the Denver Art Museum housed a Zuni war god. When the Zuni argued for the return of the war god, they indicated that proper handling within the tradition of the Zuni peoples was essential for protecting the Zuni or others from harm (Wolfe & Mibach, 1983). Such examples speak to both the power of sacred objects as well as how their contamination may negatively impact an individual's spiritual life.

A second form of contamination can occur when someone denigrates the quality of an individual's spiritual practice. Because one's connection to his or her higher power is likely impacted, one's spiritual worth and the integrity of his or her spiritual practice is degraded. Dehan and Levi (2009) described this as occurring for Haredi Jewish women when their husbands would make comments such as "your prayer has no worth" (p. 1301). While such examples appear to overlap with emotional abuse,

contamination of practice is distinguished by the primary target being one's spiritual life.

Impact of Spiritual Abuse for Indigenous Elders

The impact of spiritual abuse can be incredibly damaging. Gubi and Jacobs (2009) interviewed counselors working with clients who were spiritually abused by religious leaders. Counselors reported that clients identified as feeling disempowered, as if they "lost their voice," and endorsed an inability to say "no" for fear of impacting their relationships with God (p. 196). Denial of access to ceremonies and belittlement of spiritual practice prevents spiritual satisfaction (Dehan & Levi, 2009). Grayshield & Mihceby (2014) linked connection to the spirit, the Mother Earth, and awareness as an interconnected being to wellness. Hence, spiritual abuse within American Indian populations serves as a direct inhibitor to wellness.

A key component to American Indian spirituality is connectedness. Removing the spiritual from the physical can lead to severe consequences (Bigfoot, 1998). Practicing and expressing spirituality is an essential component to connection and balance. Spiritual abuse disrupts an elder's ability to seek connection lending itself to dire consequences.

It is also important to consider the impact of who may perpetrate spiritual abuse. Certainly, the long-standing cultural genocides of American Indian peoples can be understood as spiritual abuse, but spiritual abuse occurring within the family is a damaging extension of historical trauma. Braveheart and Horse (2000) discussed how manifestations of abuse within the family can be direct results of experiencing traumatic events targeted at American Indian peoples. Gunderson (2006) found that elders directly attributed the boarding school era as a key factor in creating the environment of spiritual abuse. Hence, understanding how these components interweave within the lens of historical trauma is essential.

There are several layers of impact if a grandchild steals an elder's sacred pipe to sell it for money. First, it is important to note how a grandchild stealing from an elder reflects a form of recapitulated historical trauma. Poverty reflects a lack of resources stemming from consistent, systemic efforts for nonindigenous persons to acquire American Indian resources. The need to steal within an American Indian community results from the larger history of limiting resources for American Indians. Second, it is important to understand the impact within the context of the family. The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is especially valued within American Indian communities (Bigfoot, 1998). Elders traditionally provided care and education for their grandchildren while the young adults/parents attended to physically demanding jobs (Bigfoot). Having a grandchild steal from an elder would have the incredible impact of breaking the bonds of mutual love and respect between elders and grandchildren. Finally, there is the impact of losing a sacred object that is essential to practice. Being unable to have access to the necessary materials to gain spiritual balance would have extreme impact on the elder and may impact his or her longevity and quality of life. Overall, when placing spiritual abuse within the context of an elder's experience as an American Indian and his or her family and spiritual life, spiritual abuse can damage the dignity and wellness of an elder.

Need for an Elder Abuse Category of Spiritual Abuse

The WHO definition of elder abuse includes physical abuse, psychological abuse, financial exploitation, active and passive neglect, sexual abuse, and denial of rights (World Health Organization, 2008). This definition of elder abuse does not specifically mention spiritual abuse. However, it does speak to "denial of rights," which is at the core of spiritual abuse. Beaman (2002) contends that even though religious freedom is a constitutionally protected right, it apparently has significant limitations when talking about Aboriginal peoples whose rights are far less protected.

Both the U.S. and Canadian governments have threatened the integrity of indigenous peoples through historical acts such as the reservation system, the government claiming traditional hunting grounds and residential schools, and most recently the threat of destroying burial sites and sacred land with the Dakota Access Pipeline (Gone, 2009; LaDue, 1994). Defining spiritual abuse may allow for some healing from historical trauma. Gone found that American Indian community members identified integration of culture and history as essential for healing from historical trauma. Grayshield and Mihceby (2010) described cultural revitalization as a form of social justice with the Washo tribe. Developing a culturally informed definition of spiritual abuse serves as a first step toward justice and cultural revitalization.

Acculturation and assimilation are common ways to perpetuate colonization (Brown, 2014). It is essential that definitions of spiritual abuse do not reflect efforts to assimilate the spiritual experiences of American Indian elders. This might occur by attempting to categorize experiences of spiritual abuse involving the selling of spiritual objects as financial exploitation, sexual acts during ceremonies as sexual abuse, and denial of access as neglect. Forcing elders to fit their experiences into westernized impressions of abuse extends colonization through assimilation. Such a practice overlooks the centrality of spirituality within American Indian experiences.

Society of Indian Psychologists (2013) summarized common values among indigenous peoples. Of particular importance is the notion of health. Unlike westernized impressions of health that delineate dimensions of wellness such as body, emotions, mind, and spirit, American Indian conceptualizations of health emphasize holistic interconnection (Society of Indian Psychologists). Physical health, mental health, and spiritual health are not distinguished, and healing needs to be placed within a social, political, and historical context. This notion extends within the community in that the health of an individual bidirectionally influences the health of the community. When an individual in the community experiences a disparity in health, the community experiences the same ailment (Society of Indian Psychologists, 2013). Taken within the context of spiritual abuse, this implies that spiritual abuse of an individual impacts the spiritual health of the community. Understanding and conceptualizing spiritual abuse is an essential step toward healing historical trauma within indigenous communities.

Identifying spiritual abuse may serve as a form of sacred justice. Sacred justice requires taking steps to achieve balance and hinges on knowledge of the spiritual (LeResche, 1993). When discussing instances of sexual abuse with American Indian communities, Rendon (1997) indicated that a first step to healing is naming the phenomenon. Naming experiences of spiritual abuse for what they

are, rather than placing them within categories of financial, emotional, sexual, or physical abuse, allows for better movement toward this balance. It allows for connectedness during a time of disconnection.

Conclusions

Spiritual abuse is much more than a conceptual term that can give insight to an in-depth understanding of the magnitude and underlying factors of elder abuse that are missed in the analysis and treatment of elder abuse in American Indian communities. Spiritual abuse is a developing construct with few researchers examining its bounds and impact. This paper outlines dimensions of spiritual abuse, such as (a) abuse from trusted spiritual leaders or mentors, (b) limitations of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice, and (c) contamination of sacred objects or practice. These definitions can serve as a guide for tribes to generate culturally appropriate definitions of spiritual abuse in light of tribal customs.

This provides a point of continuation to further develop a definition of spiritual abuse that is relevant to American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian populations, as well as the general population, to be included as a type of elder abuse. Further research is required to support this notion in the literature on elder abuse in Native American communities. Future research should examine the validity of the definition with American Indian elders and other cultures and religious sects, the magnitude of spiritual abuse and its impact on health outcomes, and institutional manifestations of spiritual abuse. While this paper focused on American Indian experiences, it is important to explore how these experiences may look similar or different across other indigenous peoples around the world. Such research provides starting points to measure and understand culturally appropriate manifestations of spiritual abuse.

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