

Exploring Generational Trauma in Indigenous Peoples of Canada

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Historical Context

Indigenous Peoples of Canada – including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities – have experienced long-term trauma due to colonization. Before European contact, Indigenous societies had their own family systems, their languages, cultures they follow and laws. This changed dramatically with European settlement and government policies created to assimilate Indigenous peoples.

The most harmful system was the **Residential School System**, which operated for more than 150 years (Government of Canada, 2021). Indigenous children were taken from their families by force and placed in church-run schools where they were forbidden to speak their languages or practice their culture. Many children experienced physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect; thousands also suffered illness, malnutrition, or even death.

Other systemic traumas included:

- The **Indian Act**
- The **Sixties Scoop**, where Indigenous children were placed into non-Indigenous foster homes
- Loss of lands and traditional ways of life
- Forced relocation of the communities

These events created extreme psychological and cultural damage that did not end with one generation and instead it passed down through many.

Psychological and Social Impact

The trauma from residential schools affected individuals, communities and the families on multiple levels.

Psychological Impact (PTSD, ACEs, emotional harm)

Children in residential schools experienced many **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**, such as abuse, separation from parents, lack of affection, and fear. These experiences are

strongly linked to higher risks of **PTSD, depression, anxiety, substance use, and emotional dysregulation** in adulthood (CAMH, 2020).

Many survivors grew up without learning healthy ways of expressing emotions, because love and comfort were rarely present in the schools. This made it harder for them to parent their own children later in life.

Attachment and Emotional Impact

Attachment theory helps explain the emotional consequences. Young children develop secure attachment only when they receive consistent care and warmth. Residential schools destroyed this possibility:

- Children lost physical and emotional connection with caregivers
- Many experienced fears instead of safety
- Attachment wounds turned into distrust, anger, or emotional numbness

As adults, survivors often had difficulties with:

- Trust and relationships
- Self-worth
- Regulating emotions
- Parenting with warmth (because they have never received it by themselves)

Social Impact

The trauma influenced social structures too. Communities faced:

- Loss of language and cultural identity
- Breakdown of families
- Increased substance use, violence, and community grief
- Mistrust toward government and institutions

The school system was not just harmful to individuals – it disrupted the entire foundation of Indigenous societies.

Transmission Across Generations

Generational trauma occurs when the effects of trauma continue in later generations even if they never experienced the original event directly.

Behavioral Transmission

Children learn from the environment they grow up in. Survivors who struggled with PTSD, emotional numbness, or substance use unintentionally passed these behaviors to their children through:

- Modeling (children copy what they usually see)
- Limited emotional expression
- Difficulty providing consistent care

This does not mean survivors failed as parents – it means they were never given the tools to parent in a healthy way because they get harmed first by the system.

Emotional Transmission

Unresolved trauma can influence the emotional climate of a household:

- High stress
- Anger outbursts
- Unpredictable parenting]
- Fear of abandonment
- Hypervigilance

Children may internalize these patterns and develop insecure attachment styles or emotional sensitivity.

Cultural Transmission

Residential schools tried to erase Indigenous culture by banning languages and traditions. Many survivors grew up disconnected from:

- Language
- Spirituality
- Cultural identity
- Traditional parenting styles

This cultural loss created identity confusion in later generations, affecting self-concept and belonging.

Biological | Epigenetic Transmission

New research suggests trauma can impact gene expression, influencing stress responses in later generations (Yehuda et al., 2016). This means:

- Higher sensitivity to stress
- Greater risk of anxiety or depression
- Changes in the body's stress hormone regulation

Epigenetics shows that trauma is not only emotional – it can affect biology too.

Attachment, Temperament, and Self-Concept Impact

- Children of survivors may develop **anxious or avoidant attachment** if parents struggled to show affection.

- Temperament may be shaped by high-stress environments, making children more reactive or cautious.
- Self-concept may be affected by internalized stigma, cultural loss, or feeling disconnected from ancestors and community.

Together, these create a cycle where trauma can continue unless healing is prioritized and even community support/cultural reconnection should also be prioritized.

Contemporary Impact and Resilience

Modern Consequences

The effects of these traumas are still visible today. Many Indigenous communities face:

- Health disparities (higher rates of chronic illness, mental health struggles)
- Intergenerational poverty (caused by decades of displacement and limited opportunities)
- Education gaps
- Overrepresentation in child welfare and justice systems
- Mistrust of government, police, and healthcare (based on historical harm and broken promises)
- Higher rates of PTSD, addiction, and suicide

These issues are not the result of individual failure – they are the consequences of systemic trauma.

Resilience and Healing

Despite this, Indigenous communities show powerful resilience:

- Rebuilding languages through immersion schools
- Reviving ceremonies, traditions, and land-based learning
- Creating trauma-informed healing programs
- Truth and Reconciliation efforts
- Strengthening community identity
- Youth reconnecting with culture and elders

Resilience is a core part of Indigenous survival. Their strength and cultural wisdom continue to guide healing across generations.

Personal Reflection

This assignment changed the way I understand trauma. Before researching, I knew that Indigenous communities had suffered in the past, but I did not fully understand how deep and long-lasting the effects were. Learning about residential schools, ACEs, and generational trauma

showed me that trauma is not just a single event – it can affect entire families, communities, and even many future generations if not healed on time.

What surprised me the most was how trauma can be passed down not only emotionally but also biologically through epigenetics. It made me realize that healing is not just an individual process; it must involve communities, families and cultural restoration.

I also learned the importance of respect and empathy. Indigenous peoples did not just experience personal harm – they experienced systematic attempts to erase their identity. Understanding this gave me a new perspective on why issues like mistrust, poverty, or mental health struggles exist today.

This assignment helped me see trauma and recovery in a more human way. Healing requires compassion, cultural reconnection, and listening to stories of survival. It also showed me the strength of Indigenous communities, who continue to rebuild, resist, and rise above the pain created by colonization. Their resilience is inspiring and something everyone can learn from.

References

- CAMH (2020). *Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*.
- Government of Canada (2021). *Residential Schools in Canada*.
- Yehuda, R. et al. (2016). *Intergenerational effects of trauma via epigenetics*.
- AI tools like {Copilot, Gemini, Claude}