



Lateral violence within the Aboriginal community in Adelaide: “It affects our identity and wellbeing”

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Abstract

The term “lateral violence” describes how members of an oppressed group direct their dissatisfaction inward. This paper reports on qualitative interviews with 30 local Aboriginal participants in Adelaide, South Australia. The purpose was to explore understandings, awareness, experiences, and effects of lateral violence. Most participants completed two questionnaires (the Kessler-5 and negative life events scales) in order to gain further insight into their wellbeing and its association with experiences of lateral violence. Overall, four major interpretative themes emerged from interviews: the predominantly covert and insidious nature of lateral violence; the

relationship between racism and lateral violence; challenges to identity as acts of lateral violence; and the destructive effects of lateral violence on wellbeing. The wellbeing scales indicated overall that participants’ psychological distress was in the moderate range, with 29% scoring in the high/very high psychological distress range. Many of the participants with high distress levels relayed traumatic narratives of lateral violence and were exposed to a number of negative life events. It is hoped that by increasing awareness of lateral violence and its effects, this will assist in preventing lateral violence incidences within Indigenous communities.

Keywords: Lateral violence, racism, oppression, identity, wellbeing, trauma.

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Introduction

Lateral violence (LV) refers to the ways oppressed and powerless people covertly and

overtly direct their dissatisfaction inward, toward each other, and those less powerful than themselves (Native Counselling Services of Alberta, 2008). The concept of LV for Aboriginal¹ people is relatively recent in Australia and its introduction coincides with Australian Indigenous involvement at the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide conference in Alberta, 2006 (Clark & Augoustinos, 2015) and in information conveyed through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner² (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2011).

Within Aboriginal communities LV is believed to exist within families and communities (Langton, 2008) and various sectors in Australia such as: the Aboriginal corporate sector and organisations (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, 2010); the university sector (National Tertiary Education Union [NIU/NTEU], 2011); and in the native title process (Gooda, 2011). Lateral violence has its roots in colonisation and includes a spectrum of behaviours such as gossiping, jealousy, bullying, shaming, physical violence (AHRC, 2011), sabotage, harassment, backstabbing and threats (Equay-Wuk, 2015). The effects of LV include a blame mentality (Derrick, 2006), sleep disorders, weight loss or gain and depression, among other side effects (Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC], 2015).

Features Related to Lateral Violence

Historically, Fanon (1963) argued that white colonialism imposed a false and degrading existence on its black victims, and used power and control to oppress and ensure conformity and an inferior status. Internalisation of this inferior status created an “inferiority complex” which attributed to infighting. Similarly, in Australia conformity was through racist laws, policies and practices associated with colonialism and which continues to have devastating and traumatic effects on Aboriginal people. For

example, colonisation plays a part in the widespread and devastating effects on the physical, social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and mental health of Indigenous people today (Parker & Milroy, 2014). This is also evident in the high levels of psychological distress and stress currently faced by many Aboriginal people (AIHW, 2009). Trans-generational trauma (Atkinson, 2002) or collective trauma (Krieg, 2009) is also linked to colonisation; is prolonged, cumulative and intergenerational where Aboriginal people are continuously vulnerable and at risk to new traumas on an everyday basis (Krieg, 2009).

Racism is generally conceptualised as operating at three levels: *institutional racism*- the differential access to goods, services and opportunities in society which are normalised, sometimes legalised and often manifest as inherited disadvantage; *individual or personal racism*- is about prejudice and discrimination; and *internal racism*- the acceptance by members of stigmatised groups of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth (Jones, 2000). All these forms of racism continue to exist in Australia toward Aboriginal people today (Stolper & Hammond, 2010) and results in feelings of powerlessness (Paradies, 2006b).

Research on racism in Australia has highlighted major adverse effects on Indigenous health, wellbeing and mental health (Paradies, 2006b). Furthermore, when oppression and racism are internalised the effects can be devastating. This has been described as “rage or aggression turned inwards” (Dudgeon, 2000) which can lead to acts of suicide, self-mutilation, alcohol abuse, depression and intra-cultural violence within the Aboriginal population.

Identity

Indigenous identity is fundamental, complex, and aligned with socio-historical constructs and discourses (Paradies, 2006a). Indigenous identity has been constructed and used throughout

¹ The term “Aboriginal” is used as the research is about Aboriginal people. This will be interchanged with the word “Indigenous” when used in research and at a national or international level.

² The current Aboriginal Social Justice Commission at the Australian Human Rights Commission is Mick Gooda.

Australia's political history to help direct government policies and actions toward Aboriginal people, such as the categorisation of blood quantum from "full blood" to "octoroons" often with devastating outcomes (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997).

Aboriginal identity continues to be on the political agenda with the categorisation and questioning of Aboriginality common in the context of racism and oppression within Australia whereby characterisations of the "real Aboriginal" are prominent. This view of the real or idealised Aboriginal can be represented by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Moore (2008) refers to this idealisation as "identity politics" where Aboriginal culture is represented as typical, traditionally oriented, internally homogenous, linked to the past and where its members are in solidarity. This ideal view does not recognise the contemporary Aboriginal person who may be cosmopolitan, tertiary educated, works with or is associated with government and has assets; yet they are not assimilated and have a comfortable Aboriginal identity. This coincides with statistics that many Indigenous Australians fail to conform to such an idealised view of the "real Aboriginal". For example, about 90% of Aboriginal people do not speak an Aboriginal language as the main language spoken at home, yet over half (63%) identify with a particular clan, tribal or language group or mission (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2015). Thus, failing to address identity politics in the context of finding solutions to Aboriginal issues is maintaining dysfunction and the status quo.

The Present Study

Given that LV is a relatively new term applied to Aboriginal people, there is limited information and literature in Australia directly relating to LV. There is often reliance on Indigenous Canadian literature, "grey" literature and on overlapping literature that is central to LV such as trauma, oppression and racism. Furthermore, there is virtually no information on the effects of LV on wellbeing. Hence, this research aims to contribute to the limited literature on LV in Australia as well as explore the possible associations amongst LV, stress and psychological distress for Aboriginal people in

Adelaide. Thus it is hypothesised that LV is a major impediment to Aboriginal people's identity and wellbeing in ways that are similar to racism and trauma.

Research Approach

Indigenous Framework

When engaging in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people an Indigenous framework is necessary to endorse cultural safety and respect, provide relevancy and thus context to the material (Rigney, 1999). Such a framework is intended to embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ontology, axiology and diversity (Smith, 2003). The positioning of Indigeneity and of relationality and an "insider" approach (Wilson, 2008) are also important features.

Participants

There were 30 Aboriginal participants consenting to take part in the study. Inclusion criteria was identification as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, be 18+ and residing in Adelaide. The majority of participants were female (63%). Ages ranged from early 20s to mid-60s. About 13% of participants were in the younger age bracket (30 years and under) and 10% were in their late 50s to mid-60s. Furthermore almost half (47%) of the participants in the study had a university level education.

Materials: Wellbeing Scales

Before the interviews, most participants (n=21) were administered two questionnaires, the Kessler-5 (K-5) and negative life events scales (NLES), that measured domains of their wellbeing. Nine participants did not fill out questionnaires because either English was a second language which made it difficult or there was a preference to yarn rather than fill out forms. Both scales have been used widely and performed robustly within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Cunningham & Paradies, 2012; Kowal, Gunthorp & Bailie, 2007).

The K-5 asked whether during the past four weeks participants felt: nervous, without hope, restless or jumpy, everything was an effort, and so sad nothing could cheer them up. The five response options ranged from all of the time to none of the time. Scores indicated levels of stress

ranging from no distress to extreme psychological distress. The NLES asked about the experiences of participants from a list of 15 events within the last year. This list can be seen in Table 1.

Procedure and Analysis

Prior to commencing the research ethical approval was gained from the Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee in December 2012 and from the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee in May 2013. In order to recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants a flyer, with an invitation to “chat” about LV, was disseminated via various email networks with a request to pass on through the Aboriginal grapevine. An information sheet was then distributed to interested people which included background knowledge on the researchers, the research, rights and responsibilities of involvement, risks, and incentives (i.e. \$50 gift voucher). Preceding the interviews participants were provided with information about counselling services and assurances of support upon distress. Brief demographic information, such as gender, age, and educational background, were collated for all participants.

For the interviews some typical and broad questions were: “Have you heard about LV?”, “What do you know/understand about LV?”, “Can you tell me about some of your experiences of LV?”, “How has it affected you?”, “What have you done to stop or curb LV in the past?”, and “What would you like to see happen to make changes in the community?”. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to an hour; were tape-recorded and transcribed. All participants were asked if they wanted to view the transcripts prior to analysis and only one participant requested to endorse.

Transcripts were then de-identified to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants including other names mentioned in transcripts. The data was coded using NVivo10 qualitative software and analysed using a thematic process. This involves a rich description of the recurring (and unique) patterns in the data set across all the interviews in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

The Wellbeing Scales

For the participants (n=21) on the K-5 the overall score was 10.33 with a standard deviation (SD) of 5.8. This indicates that overall participants’ psychological distress was at moderate levels (but reaching a high stress level). Seventy-one percent scored in the moderate (5-11) range and 29% scored in the high/very high range of psychological distress (12-25).

The NLES overall mean was 5.8 (stressors) and SD was 3.3. Five participants (24%) experienced between 2-3 stressors, 11 (52%) between 4-8 stressors, and 4 (19%) experienced more than 8 stressors. Of the 6 (29%) participants who scored in the high/very high range for psychological distress (K-5), 4 participants had relatively high stress with 6 or more life stressors with 1 participant having 13 stressors.

Table 1 shows the frequency for those who responded “yes” to particular stressful events. The highest stressful event was racism and discrimination (52%), followed by drugs and alcohol (calculated together; 45%), serious illness (43%), and witnessing or being involved in violence and abuse (38%).

Table 1: NLES frequency and percentage of each item in the last year (n=21)

NLES frequency and percentage of each item in the last year (N=4)			
Events	Yes (total)	Yes (%)	
1 Serious illness	9	43	
2 Serious accident	4	19	
3 Death of family member or close friend	7	33	
4 Divorce or separation	4	19	
5 Not able to get a job	9	43	
6 Lost job	8	38	
7 Alcohol related problems	9	43	
8 Drug related problems	10	48	
9 Seeing fights or people beaten up	9	43	
10 Abuse or violence	7	33	
11 Trouble with police	5	24	
12 Gambling problem	6	29	
13 Member of family sent to jail	6	29	
14 Overcrowding at home	3	14	
15 Discrimination/racism	11	52	

Themes from Interviews

Many participants had heard of LV prior to the interviews and sought out information to further understand it (see Clark & Augoustinos, 2015). Many participants recognised LV as a problem, and linked it to colonialism. This study elicited many themes, however this analysis specifically focused on the nature of LV, racism, identity and its effect on wellbeing.

Lateral violence. Overt or covert behaviour? Lateral violence was primarily viewed in terms of covert behaviour of others such as bullying, cyber bullying, spreading rumours, gossiping, shaming and jealousy. Only a few participants viewed LV as overt, which corresponded with their experiences of being exposed to violence. The two accounts below exemplify covert and overt behaviours respectively.

Maggie (age category 46-50): Well the infighting, the bullying...gossiping about people...putting people down; spreading rumours, gossiping is the same thing, shaming people, trying to keep people in their place. Know your place in the world...like...for anything; having a hierarchy in place and knowing your place in that system.

Paul (age category 41-45): I saw my cousin get killed...they [Aboriginal community members] ran him over. They didn't go to jail. But that is back in the 80s...[it was] over who ever took the carton of beer and who grew plants [marijuana] 'cos they all grew dope back then...And you get all aunties, cousins...they all rah rah and it turns too big. They drink too much...then it happened...He [the perpetrator] washed the car the next day and he got one year [in detention]...then my brother got killed by someone too, Aboriginal [person]...once my brother got killed my whole family was destroyed.

Most participants described covert forms such as that described by Maggie. This may be because physical violence is often categorised separately under abuse, violence, or related to the criminal justice system (AIHW, 2015). Paul's overt experiences were traumatic and he is one of the participants who scored extremely high on both the K-5 and NLES and consequently is seeing a regular counsellor for his trauma and LV.

It can be argued that covert forms of LV behaviour appear to be the "hidden" or "safe" option and are less likely to be detected and identified as forms of violence given their non-

criminal status. Perhaps LV in its covert form is similar to modern forms of racism, which are seen to align with increasing social taboos against expressing blatant and hostile racist remarks. Just like subtle and covert forms of racism, covert LV can be just as damaging given its insidious nature (see for example Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005; Pedersen & Walker, 1997).

Racism is at the heart of lateral violence. Racism featured strongly in many participants' accounts. At least 53% referred to racism or racist behaviours in the interviews. Racism was described as being perpetrated by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. The extracts below explore relations between Aboriginal people and "white" systems; and between Aboriginal people themselves (within group prejudice).

Molly (age category 51-55):... the lateral violence in communities is fuelled or coordinated by white people, I reckon, the first thing...whether it's a principal or a manager of a program... They are told to identify those key players in the community. There is no such thing...as proper community consultation as it is always done with these key players. That's what I was saying before about playing them against each other. Because let's just say that one is coming to all the meetings and the other ones are having these issues over here. They will focus on that person. It's almost like grooming so. If these guys come to the meeting and they decide against what the others have been deciding, the non-Indigenous person will manipulate that person and start making meetings for when he is not around and start turning them on each other.

Maggie (age category 46-50): And to me it's like they [the governments] will chuck a couple of scraps at the people and they all fight for it, and because that's all they got...Yeah because they don't have much money or much resources they all want that bit...Conquer and divide.

Dianne (age category 26-30):...I think that was the big eye-opener for me...to put lateral violence on it, it just gave me a whole other spin to it. And it kind of gave it its proper name. Like, it...I thought it was racism, but I...it wasn't really...it was my people, against me. And when I finally saw that...the link between the two, that kind of affirmed me, and I went, "Okay, I know what that is...and I don't want to be a part of it."

Both Molly and Maggie indicate that racism and white systems or people utilise a “divide and conquer” strategy to deliberately manipulate community protocol or to provide limited resources to Aboriginal people. This suggests that racism fuels and divides community who then fight each other in ways that are detrimental. Divide and conquer is a well-known strategy used by imperial and colonial powers to control and weaken empowered and collective people by enabling mutual mistrust and was used particularly towards Indigenous people (Posner, Spier, & Vermeule, 2009). Thus it appears as relevant today as it did in the past. For racism between Aboriginal people Dianne expressed relief that there is a more appropriate label than “racism” for such infighting. As Bennett (2014) argues, the questioning of one’s authenticity as an Aboriginal person based on skin colour is not limited to non-Aboriginal people alone: it is a common feature of LV within and between Indigenous peoples.

Stripping away each other’s identity. How identity is judged and questioned by other Aboriginal people in the community was a major concern for these participants and was perceived as a form of LV. This judging of identity included the colour of one’s skin, physical appearance, aligning with white values, behaviours, people and organisations. This kind of personal criticism was viewed as hostile and appeared damaging to one’s wellbeing. Challenges to one’s Aboriginal identity took the following forms below.

Dianne (age category 26-30): ...Because I’m lighter [skinned], I don’t look Aboriginal...I get a lot of people coming into this agency and if they’re sort of grumpy or they haven’t got a good service they’d say, “Oh well, I thought this was an Aboriginal agency.” And I always feel like I have to defend my culture, and I always feel like I have to work harder...So it’s just...it’s something that I’ve always grown up with, and I think that’s why I’m so against it [LV], because I’ve only just sort of, in the last couple of years, found it [that it was actually lateral violence]...like, sort of put a name to it, and said, “This is what it is.” I always thought it was something to do with me. But it’s not...it’s...I should be proud of who I am, and I’m proud that my dad is Aboriginal, and I’m proud that my mum’s Irish...and they’re both just as important to me. But that doesn’t mean that my Aboriginality is less than someone else [‘s].

Ben (age category 18-25): ...I had something happen to me not that long ago from my manager who is Aboriginal. She said some racist remarks to me like “I am a white cunt” and “I am going to destroy you and take this project off you”. She had some drug and alcohol problems, she was intoxicated at the time...[I] had been working for two years and didn’t know she felt like that cos of my skin colour and that destroyed me.

Judy (age category 41-45): People putting people down...and community “you married a white fella”, “you wear makeup”, “your kids are in private school”. All those values that say you are less Aboriginal than me are in my opinion feeding back into those old colonial policies...I am fair skinned and not from these lands and I always thought it was just personal. That it was me or that I internalised things and thinking if only I were darker or only if I was Narungga [Aboriginal people of the Yorke Peninsula] and then I realised I wasn’t alone. Those dark-skinned sisters experienced lateral violence as well.

Both Dianne and Ben were challenged by other Aboriginal people about the colour of their skin and viewed as too “white” to be Aboriginal and continue to find ways to cope with its debilitating effects. Judy’s account demonstrates that accusations of being “white” is associated with values on how one grooms, is educated, relationship choices and ambitions.

Colour, physical appearance and western cultural values associated with success, professionalism and materialism were associated with “whiteness” and continue to be used as a test or validation of Aboriginal identity. This is consistent with the research literature (see for example Bennett, 2014) and is a form of social exclusion and derogation that many Aboriginal people have to deal with on a daily basis. It also highlights that identity is criticised by the politics of the idealised Aboriginal (see Moore, 2008). The process of calling other Aboriginal people “white” is also synonymous to being a traitor and where one is always being measured despite the colour of one’s skin. Consequently Aboriginal people can be referred to as “coconuts” (black on the outside, white on the inside) or other derogatory names (Gorringer, Ross, & Fforde, 2009). This is similar to the “acting white” phenomenon described by African Americans where accusations of being white are propelled when one is perceived to align too closely to

white culture (Grantham & Biddle, 2014). Furthermore, such constructions have the capacity to produce resource and material differentiations between “the haves” and “have nots” within communities which is often a source of conflict and tension (Coffin, Larson, & Cross, 2010).

Lateral violence is destructive and affects wellbeing. Many participants acknowledged the destructive nature of LV, how it affects wellbeing and the desperate need for solutions and restitution. The accounts below exemplify the destructive effects of LV.

Freda (age category 41-45): Then I started to think about my own personal experiences around lateral violence, family violence and it just got me thinking that it's like a “bug that eats our people and community and destroys people”. Doing the work with the [name deleted] program – getting people together and talking groups you know, talking about the program and lateral violence. People started talking, how we gonna try and fix this and talk to our mob about [it]?

Kelly (age category 41-45): Yeah, whether that's from gossip, or whether it's from you know...yeah, just sort of like your involvement it can be really...it can be petty but it can be ongoing, and whether that's...that thing, when that's happening that's going to sort of like prevent them...you know, they don't think about it when it's happening, they don't really understand they just, you know, they want to be connected, everyone wants to be happy but they don't understand how everyone's different and they can experience...they take it differently, people can take it differently and really internalise it, I suppose, they can't really...they can sort of feel uncomfortable, they can make themselves sick because of whether [silence].

Freda highlights LV as a soul destroying bug and tries to get people to talk about it. Kelly's reference to becoming sick because of the effects of LV is also illustrative. Kelly was a participant who also scored high on the K-5 with many life stressors on the NLES. Thus, she was talking from her own experiences of trauma. This coincides with literature on trauma and vulnerability (Krieg, 2009).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was significant in that it provided a voice about LV by Aboriginal people in a local context. The engagement of a number of participants actualises the willingness for voices to be heard, despite LV being a sensitive and perhaps reluctant topic to talk about within Aboriginal communities. Secondly, given there is very little research on LV, particularly the effects of LV within the Australian Indigenous community, this research will contribute greatly to the literature and further research interest. By demonstrating the detrimental effects on identity and wellbeing, a focus on coping and solutions for the prevention of LV is timely and are discussed further in an upcoming article.

In summary LV is a relatively recent term applied in Australia to explain infighting within oppressed Indigenous communities and its roots are traced to colonialism. Along with racism and trauma, LV contributes to the damaging effects of wellbeing and contributes to powerlessness. Racist policies and practices provided a fertile ground for the internal denigration and division of Aboriginal people. One way this division continues is through LV where the oppressed becomes the oppressor.

Although behaviours associated with LV can be found in populations all over the world, within oppressed minority groups such behaviours can become intractable and normalised which can hamper solutions for change. As the analysis above demonstrates, LV refers to both overt (physical) violence and covert (i.e. emotional and psychological) behaviours. Yet covert behaviours have the potential to cause significant psychological distress particularly when it is internalised and parallels modern forms of racism which are subtle and insidious.

The means to perpetrate LV amongst Aboriginal people is via actual or perceived vulnerability, deficits or benefits in the other. The most common trigger was challenges to identity via blood quantum and associated western values. This contributes to being put down, bullied, ostracised and called names. Judgement of inauthenticity is linked to an ideal view of Aboriginality, which is about being “black”, traditionally oriented, problematic, and a victim.

If Aboriginal people hold to such views of Aboriginality, then this becomes the measurement where people are considered more or less than and therefore exposed to LV. Therefore accepting diversity and different identities can potentially assist in hampering LV and provide a freer and greater sense of wellbeing.

The average number of life stressors for participants was relatively high with racism and discrimination rated as their major source of stress. Approximately a third of the participants scored high on psychological distress which corresponds with the national level for Aboriginal people. In this study the high psychological distress combined with high number of stressors appeared to be linked to the more traumatic stories associated with LV in the narratives. Accordingly, the relational aspect of racism, trauma, identity, wellbeing and LV appears evident by the experiences of the participants, subsequent themes, the literature and the results of the wellbeing scales. This supports the hypothesis that LV is a major impediment to identity and wellbeing in similar ways to trauma and racism.

Further Research

The topic of LV has not undergone a significant education process in many parts of Australia. Thus the implications from the findings of this research include that it can be used for community education and awareness to assist with prevention and healing. As LV is an under researched area, there are many areas that could be explored. For example, a replication of the study outside of Adelaide could be useful. Furthermore, LV occurrence could be added to the NLES to gain a wider perspective on its prevalence nationally.

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