Societal Trauma and Societal Trauma Response

Social Trauma

http://www.noanxiety.com/psychology-psychotherapy-glossary/terms-with-letter-s.html “a ‘social trauma’ is the traumatic consequence of events or situations that are potentially traumatogenic (natural calamities, wars, accidents, kidnapping, mourning, exposure to risks and danger, etc), which involve a community or one’s own definable social group (family, peer groups etc)...”

Societal Trauma

I am using the term “societal trauma” in an effort to differentiate trauma that is shared throughout the entire social group and not just in a part or pocket within the larger group. I would further suggest that the term be inclusive of all forms of traumatization that social groups experience whatever the causes, and not limited to those causes usually associated with historical trauma. Societal trauma, regardless of the causes, inflicts states of psychological, emotional, physiological, spiritual, and sociological injuries on the members of the group that in turn get passed down from one generation to the next (through mechanisms such as a societal trauma response—those dysfunctional behaviors that present themselves in a society’s behavior) unless a healing intervention happens to prevent its transmission to new generations. One kind of trauma may seem more significant than another kind but in fact all traumatization is traumatic, tragic, and creates human suffering.

Examples and vectors of Societal Trauma

1. War
2. Terrorism
3. Disease
4. Famine
5. Pestilence
6. Natural disaster
7. Racism | Poverty | Violence | Oppression (i.e., the absence of justice)
8. Genocide
10. Intergenerational Trauma (http://www.ehcounseling.com/materials/htr_transmission.pdf)
11. Collective powerlessness to prevent or change traumatic social events or outcomes
12. History of mass death (depopulation) due to any causality
13. Inescapable and prolonged national grief | marginalized or disenfranchised collective grief
14. Loss of culture through loss of culture bearers--resulting in a culture of “post depopulation crisis”
15. Loss of core identity elements (language/land base/basic freedoms of socio-religious expression/etc)
16. Disenfranchisement | marginalization at multiple (all) levels | racial/ethnic discrimination
17. Primary deprivations that are systemic/pervasive/chronic
18. Deprivation that is inescapable for an entire population
19. Successive social traumas or conflicts | No healing reprieves
20. Examples:
I. Famine then plagues then war ... European trauma Middle Ages history
II. Slavery | Afro-American history of slave trade and slavery (supported by racism in the dominant culture)
III. Genocidal aggression | Native American trauma history | Rwanda | South Africa
IV. Devastation in Haiti after hurricane | in New Orleans after hurricane
V. Devastation in Gay community late 1980s through mid-1990s from AIDS (pre-anti-viral cocktail treatment)

Societal Trauma Response

The following descriptors are suggested to give definition to the character and nature of presumed societal trauma response. These suggestions are not drawn from research but are given here for the sake of clarification. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart has looked into the effect of historical trauma on Native Americans and has given a description of the historical trauma response (http://www.ehcounseling.com/materials/htr.pdf) as it applies to the individual person. I am presuming from her work that all societal traumatizations will have their corresponding trauma responses. However, applying characteristics of an individual to a collective is controversial so it is suggested here that more research needs to be done at the social level to better understand how traumatization asserts itself in the collective as a whole. When the societal trauma is from an aggressor group acting on another group I would also suggest that both groups experience trauma. I have differentiated below how the features of trauma might present itself differently in the two different groups.

Victimized social group: a group traumatically victimized by another social group

http://www.trc10.co.za/docs/NEXTchapter.pdf

According to “Dr. Vamik Volkan’s key note address on trauma, mourning, memorials, and forgiveness” in 2006 available at the above link, there are five major psychological phenomena associated with societies that have become the targets of “others” aggression:

1. A shared sense of shame, humiliation, dehumanization and guilt
2. A shared inability to be assertive
3. A shared identification with the oppressor
4. A shared difficulty or even an inability to mourn losses
5. A shared transmission of transgenerational trauma

I would suggest further characteristics for a victimized people group:

1. Health and wellness statistics uniformly negative | disproportionate to other populations
2. The collective psyche (and the individual member’s psyche) is adversely affected:
   i. Unhealthy norms | collectively held destructive attitudes/beliefs/behaviors
   ii. These “norms” are systemic and embedded into the group’s shared worldview
   iii. These norms shape social values | norming of dysfunctional behaviors
3. Intergenerational trauma
4. Violence directed at one’s own group
5. Violence directed at the dominant group indiscriminately
6. Denial of social/collective grief
7. Destructive social and personal internalizations, introjections, attributions and projections
   i. Victim identity
   ii. Shame-based traits in the culture and in individual personalities
   iii. Unforgiveness against perpetrator society as a social norm
   iv. Villainizing of dominant culture as a social norm
8. Fear is a recognized motivation for social/societal behavior
9. The victim group is bi-cultural more so than the dominant culture

Dominant social group: for a former colonizer-settler nation
For a modern post-colonial nation with a significant burden of unresolved social injustices still affecting the inter-ethnic relationships within its society, with a demonstrated record of resistance to peacebuilding, I would suggest the term “Post-Colonizer Identity Syndrome” (PCIS) for a post-settler/colonial aggressor society, as described by the following characteristics:

1. An explorer/conquest/settler narrative
2. The dominant social group is generally monocultural in a multi-ethnic society
3. Survival-based orientation (survival needs trump needs for healing or acts of justice)
   I. Fear is an unrecognized social motivation for action
   II. Predisposed to aggression to solve national problems—“traumatized societies traumatize societies”
   III. Predisposition to Neo-colonialism (economic and cultural imperialism)
4. Destructive stereotyping of indigenous populations
   I. Demonizing and demeaning the victim people group through unacknowledged legacy of racism and/or nationalism as a basis for the justification of its national behavior
   II. Social unity based on commonly held fears and hatreds directed at the victim group
5. National narrative grounded in historical distortions | denial of national wrong-doing
   I. High tolerance for social injustice for the less powerful | abuse of power
   II. Uninspected racialism/racism | classism | prejudice/discrimination | nationalism
6. Guilt-based, nationally, which interferes with reconciliatory behavior
7. Marginalizes grief and grieving in colonized social group
8. Repeating the national cycle of abuse/violence | National aggression

Final Comments
These above sets of characteristics are not meant to be exclusive to either the victimized or aggressor people groups. They are suggested as tendencies found more commonly in the one group than the other but found in varying forms in both groups. Many of these observations are antidotal and are intended as suggestions for further studies.