

Final Project Reflections

A dialogue on the Armenian Genocide: Seeking Justice Through Intergenerational Activism

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I have always been fascinated by the long-term effects of trauma and conflict, many of which are passed down from generation to generation. My interest in intergenerational trauma began at the age of twelve, when I attended a week-long camp that was sponsored by my elementary school. This particular camp was located in Squamish, British Columbia and was hosted by elders from the Squamish First Nation. During the camp, we learnt about the history of the Squamish Nation, participated in various cultural activities and indulged in traditional meals including rock soup and bannock. Towards the end of the camp, we also learnt about the dark history of Indigenous-Canadian relations and the legacy of the residential school system, the Indian Act, and other colonial policies that sought to control Indigenous peoples and eliminate their culture. The elders explained that many Indigenous communities have yet to recover from these colonial legacies.

When I came back home from camp, I began to connect the stories that the elders spoke of with what I was seeing in my own community. Growing up just minutes away from the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, I constantly witnessed prejudice, discrimination and hatred towards First Nations people in our community. When I graduated from elementary school, I was confused when I learnt that only three of the seven First Nations students in my class would join me in high school. When I eventually graduated from high school, my classmates joked about the fact that none of these three students made it to grade twelve graduation. Behind all the jokes and unspoken words, there was a lot of pain and sadness. I could feel it, especially on the night that three siblings who attended my elementary school took their own lives in 2015.

During my time at university, I began to explore the effects of colonialism and structural violence on Indigenous populations both past and present. I looked specifically at the socio-economic conditions of Indigenous peoples in Canada and found some startling statistics:

disproportionate rates of incarceration¹, alarmingly high rates of suicide and suicidal ideation², and overall lower standards of living (income, life expectancy, etc.)³. Even though explicit colonial programs like the Indian residential schools no longer exist, we find the legacy of colonialism persist through hidden, structural problems, like the underfunding of basic services on First Nations reserves.⁴ After conducting my own research and hearing from experts and Indigenous leaders in my community, I was finally able to seek answers to some of the questions that I had as a young teenager. As someone who grew up with fellow classmates who were clearly impacted by the intergenerational trauma of colonial policies, what interested me the most as a university student was learning from young Indigenous folks about their experiences with activism, seeking justice and reconciliation. How do generations that were not directly impacted by trauma attempt to seek justice? Why is seeking justice important for certain groups who have experienced trauma and not others?

The questions that I had about intergenerational trauma and the motives to seek justice through multiple generations led me to look deeper at my own history as a first-generation Canadian whose family fled conflict and violence in India during the partition and in Uganda

¹ Chan, W., & Mirchandani, K. (2001;2008;1999;). *Crimes of colour: Racialization and the criminal justice system in Canada*. Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press; Roberts, J. V., & Reid, A. A. (2017). *Aboriginal incarceration in Canada since 1978: Every picture tells the same story*. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 59(3), 313-345.

² Barker, B., Goodman, A., & DeBeck, K. (2017). *Reclaiming indigenous identities: Culture as strength against suicide among indigenous youth in Canada*. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 108(2), e208.

³ Shankar, J., Ip, E., Khalema, E., Couture, J., Tan, S., Zulla, R. T., & Lam, G. (2013). *Education as a social determinant of health: Issues facing indigenous and visible minority students in postsecondary education in western Canada*. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 10(9), 3908-3929.

⁴ *Budget Sufficiency for First Nations Water and Wastewater Infrastructure*. (2017, December 7). Retrieved April 2, 2018, from http://www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/web/default/files/Documents/Reports/2017/FN%20Water/FN_Water_EN.pdf

during Idi Amin's 'Reign of Terror'. My parents and grandparents experienced displacement, violence, loss and hardship throughout their lives in India and Uganda, especially as religious minorities (Shia Ismaili Muslims) within the larger divisions. I can tell that my grandparents especially carry the burden of pain in their day-to-day lives, whether they are telling stories about our family or speaking about the importance of faith and religion. Despite our family's deep history of conflict, my generation has made no attempt to seek justice for the wrongdoings that occurred in the past. Perhaps our lack of motivation stems from the fact that our generation was insulated from the trauma that our parents and grandparents' generation experienced. Maybe there are other factors that determine the level of intergenerational activism, such as the type and scale of the conflict or the way that the conflict is discussed and framed. The discrepancies between certain groups with regards to intergenerational activism is something that intrigued me, both on a personal and sociological level.

For my final project, I set forward to explore the motivations behind intergenerational activism among certain groups. Specifically, I wanted to interview an activist who is motivated to seek justice despite not being directly impacted by conflict. I chose to interview Arevig Afarian, a fifth-generation Armenian genocide survivor and activist for the recognition of the Armenian genocide. I structured the interview in order to understand what exactly motivated Ms. Afarian to be an outspoken activist for the Armenian genocide recognition, looking for particular moments in her childhood and adolescents that served to influence her activism. I also inquired about the nature of the conflict, including the political and socio-economic implications today, with the hopes of finding a correlation between intergenerational trauma and activism. Finally, I asked Afarian about her vision for the Armenian cause, including what she hopes to achieve by pushing for Turkey's recognition of the Armenian genocide over 100 years later.

By interviewing Afarian and comparing her interactions with the Armenian genocide to my interactions with the Partition of India and the reign of Idi Amin, I began to understand the unique circumstances that led to discrepancies in intergenerational activism. Not only was there a difference in the way that the conflict was described and framed at a young age, but there are also differences in the way that emotions are shown and pain is expressed, where her family chose to be much more open and forthcoming about their struggles in Armenia and Lebanon. In addition, I also noticed that the nature of the conflict was vastly different between the two cases, wherein the Armenian genocide saw the systematic mass-killing of over 1.5 million people. Moreover, the fact that the Armenian genocide itself is denied by the Turkish state to this day plays a large role in the continued intergenerational strive to seek justice, or at least recognition. However, despite Turkey's continued denial of the Armenian genocide, I was extremely moved to hear Afarian's positive vision for the future of Turkish-Armenian relations. Overall, while the topic of intergenerational activism must be further researched by international relations scholars, I believe that my interview with Ms. Afarian began to explore some of the factors that influence intergenerational activism among certain groups. Furthermore, I believe that this information is highly valuable to transitional justice scholars, as they examine the ways in which communities re-negotiate relationships following mass-conflict and trauma.

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References

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