

A Reader's Response to "Lateral Violence"

Article #81 in this series, *Lateral Violence Assaults our Mental Health*, has become the most frequently visited piece on this website. It has been cited in two academic publications in Australia, in a book published in the United States, and it has been translated into Finnish and posted on a website in that country. It is not a piece of research and it is not an academic article. It is simply my thoughts following a workshop facilitated by Mohawk healer Rod Jeffries on the topic, but it struck a chord. One reader shared her story (below) about her experience with lateral violence. She has asked to remain anonymous for fear of further retaliation by the bullies in that particular community but she wants others to read about her experience in the hopes that it will help those who have also endured experiences of lateral violence. I would like to hear more stories about your experiences with lateral violence. Please feel free to e-mail me at lloyd@hawkeyeassociates.ca.

"I am an Indigenous woman pursuing a PhD. I spent the last year living and working in a northern community.

I just wanted to say that I really, really, really appreciate your writing on lateral violence as well as the impacts of residential school. My time in the community I was working in was really challenging, precisely because there is still so much trauma circulating from people's residential school experiences. "

What I struggled with the most (personally) was lateral violence -- towards me and also towards other community members. I tried, very hard, to be empathetic to the reasons for the lateral violence, but at times it's difficult to try and rationalize and minimize the experience when you're in the middle of it.

In any case, as an Indigenous woman, I really appreciate how you approach the topic. In particular, I took this statement that you wrote to heart:

"We want to build our communities because that will mean that we are healthier ourselves. The temptation, in this kind of community development, is to re-direct our negative energies toward some out-group, and to unite the community in a kind of hatred of the other, the outsider. We must not use the fact of colonialism as an excuse to avoid the more difficult task to removing that negative energy from our selves. Nested in our vision of a better community is a greater vision of a better world."

I was bullied to the point that I was counselled by a community member to get the police involved. At first I assumed I deserved this treatment, but after counselling and also after time sharing my experience with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and mentors, I've come to realize that this behaviour was unacceptable. One friend put it succinctly: "when you're treated badly, you assume you're guilty. But in this case, you didn't do anything wrong. You just existed!" For some people, I think lateral violence in Indigenous contexts can be doubly traumatizing because of childhood experiences of violence -- if you assumed you deserved to be treated badly as a child, you may assume you deserve to be treated badly as an adult (and be less likely to stand up for yourself). This experience, and the stories that other Indigenous women

have shared with me of their own encounters with lateral violence, have really made me think differently about trauma, social violence, violence, suffering and community 'resurgence'. I like that you put the emphasis on visioning a better world, and also putting the focus on removing the negative energy from ourselves.

In any case, hiy hiy for speaking so eloquently about the topic of lateral violence."