

# Etiology of depression among Native Hawai'ians

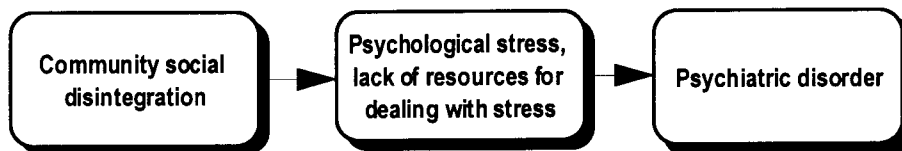
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## Introduction

Kleinman (1982) has suggested a need to develop comprehensive and heuristic theoretical approaches capable of integrating the complexity of available research in etiology of depression. The major models of depression are reviewed by Rehm and Tyndall (1993). The theories and models of depression are categorized into several major schools: psychoanalytic, behavioral, sociological, existential, cognitive, self-control, and biological. Depressive illness is described by Fowles (1993) as a final, common, psychobiological pathway that depends on the interaction of several factors, including genetic vulnerability, developmental events, psychosocial events, physiological stressors, and personality traits.

of a society and/or community. It is the lack of qualities and characteristics of a system that are necessary to fully maintain its cultural as well as societal infrastructure. Based on his social disintegration definition Leighton's model in many respects has some implications for the etiology of depression among Native Hawai'ians (Figure 1). He includes two sets of key indices as part of the process of disintegration. It seems reasonable to expect that individuals who are victims of severe cultural or social disintegration would be at high risk to develop depression. Several theories of depression posit that a specific loss of positive emotional environmental events may serve as one causal variable for depression (Lewinsohn, 1974; Seligman, 1974; Staats & Heiby, 1985). In addition, the Hawai'ian language includes vocabulary depicting systematic criteria for diagnosing depression and specific categories of losses. Given the historical cultural losses and the rapid transition into the 20<sup>th</sup> century lifestyle, it seems useful to apply Leighton's approach to Native Hawai'ians with regard to the development of depression.

Figure 1. Social Disintegration Model  
(Leighton, 1959)



One psychosocial determinant of depression may be particularly relevant to Native Hawai'ians. Leighton (1959) suggests that the process of social or cultural disintegration not only means a relative absence of patterns (social, political, economical, etc.) but also refers to ongoing deterioration in a particular society. Consequently, social integration may be considered the positive aspect of the process whereby the system maintains and adjusts itself, while social disintegration may be regarded as the negative aspect, with interruption and disarticulation in various parts of the system. Disintegration implies a moving away from the functional effectiveness

To date, there are at least two views of the role of psychosocial loss in depression specific to Native Hawai'ians. Rezentos (1988) studied the relationship between psychopathology among Native Hawai'ians and stressful life events. His theoretical model (see Figure 2) was extracted from several research models (Andrews, Tennant, Hewson, and Vaillant, 1978; and Kessler, 1979) and proposed as the Additive Burden Hypothesis Modified. Rezentos applied this Additive Burden Hypothesis Modified model to the Native Hawai'ian population. This model postulates that several distinct variables contribute to mental illness among Native Hawai'ians. In summary, his model suggests: 1) that excess psychopathology in lower class individuals is produced by a greater vulnerability to stressful life events and 2) that social situations and personal dispositions relate independently and additively to psychopathology which is mediated by life

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## Leighton's Model of Social Disintegration

### DISINTEGRATION INDICES—SET A

*Community units that are markedly disintegrated will have:*

1. **High frequency of broken homes**  
The focus here is the malfunctioning family. The "broken" state may be seen in the physical absence of mother or father without adequate surrogate, in frequent changes of patterns, or in relationships between members which are chronically distant, hostile, and unstable.
2. **Few and weak associations**  
Infrequent or no grouping of people, either formally or informally. This is evidenced by few clusterings about such interests and activities as religion, work, or recreation. The associations that did exist would be lacking in ability to act or to hold their membership together.
3. **Few and weak leaders**  
The existence of a small number of influential leaders. Those that do exist are usually weak with regard to power and leadership.
4. **Few patterns of recreation**  
The absence of sports, hobbies, and avocations. The modes of enjoying oneself will tend to be individualistic and short-term, such as drinking and sexual promiscuity.
5. **High frequency of hostility**  
Increased rates of hostile acts and verbal outcry directed at other members of the community and at outsiders.
6. **High frequency of crime and delinquency**  
The state of affairs in which criminality is rampant and may not be reflected in police reports. Usual cases of violations of laws where one can get away with it as well as acts of assault, robbery, rape, incest, cruelty to animals and children.
7. **Weak and fragmented network of communication**  
A deficiency in communications regarded as both physical and psychological. Characteristics include isolation, poor roads, and no telephones.

### DISINTEGRATION INDICES—SET B

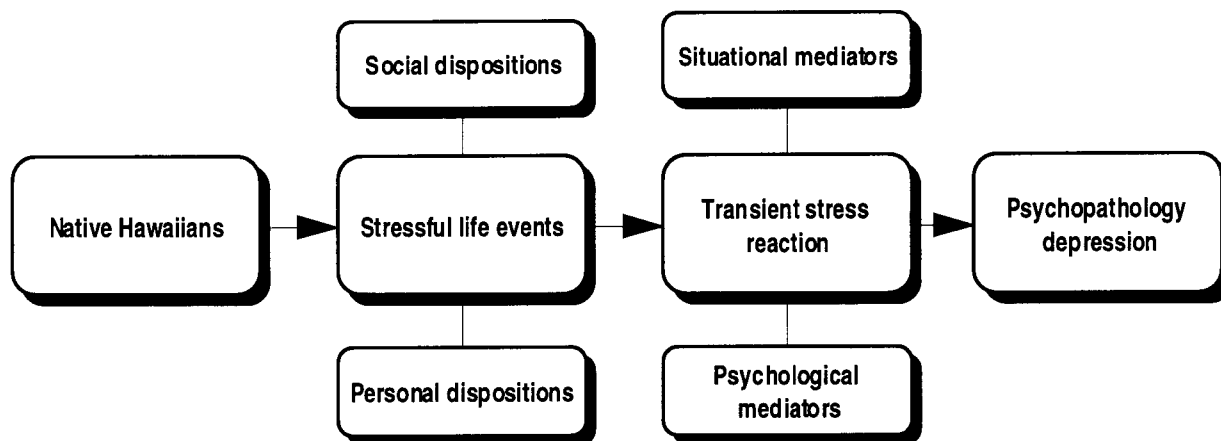
*Communities are apt to be disintegrated if they have one or more of the following:*

1. **A recent history of disaster**  
Traumatic events such as war or similar acts of destruction that eliminates large portions of a population. Consequently, at a more subtle level is the possibility that some communities might have a sufficiently high frequency of accidents on an individual basis to constitute a disruption to the social system. For example, the shift in economic trends that affect small towns or communities (e.g. shut down of a car manufacturing plant or oil spills that affects a fishing port's fishing grounds).
2. **Widespread ill health**  
Increased prevalence rates of physical or psychological impairment that interferes with the daily functioning of family patterns, associations, leadership, economic activities, and communications.
3. **Extensive poverty**  
Pervasive evidence of impoverished conditions within a community. The lack of adequate resources (i.e. financial, material, environmental, ecological) that would be able to maintain an efficient social system.
4. **Cultural confusion**  
The existence of two or more cultures in a community without ordered relationship to each other. Similarly referred to situations of acculturation or cultural conflict. Often consisting of two communities with largely incompatible systems of sentiments simultaneously, one partially forgotten, the other imperfectly learned.
5. **Widespread secularization**  
The absence of religious sentiments. The discontinuing of traditional religious practices, customs, and or values due to competing external forces.
6. **Extensive migration**  
The emigration as an index that forces individuals to vacate out of the social system.
7. **Rapid and widespread social change**  
Social change is already implicit in cultural confusion and secularization. To this may be added a more explicit idea with reference to technological innovations and the introduction of sociocultural patterns as such.

events. Henceforth, the Additive Burden Hypothesis Modified predicts stress outcome depending on a person's resources and skills. The specific resources and skills relevant to Native Hawaiians remain to be explicated. Thus, the Hawaiian terms for depression and the models reviewed suggest various types of losses, especially cultural ones, which may qualify as stressful life events.

Another model posits that the psychological effects of cultural conflict and acculturation of Native Hawaiians are partly suggested by their physical health status. The Native Hawaiian Education Assessment Project (NHEAP, 1983) speculated that such acculturation stressors caused a loss of culture so severe that a chronic type of depression exists among modern Hawaiians. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979)

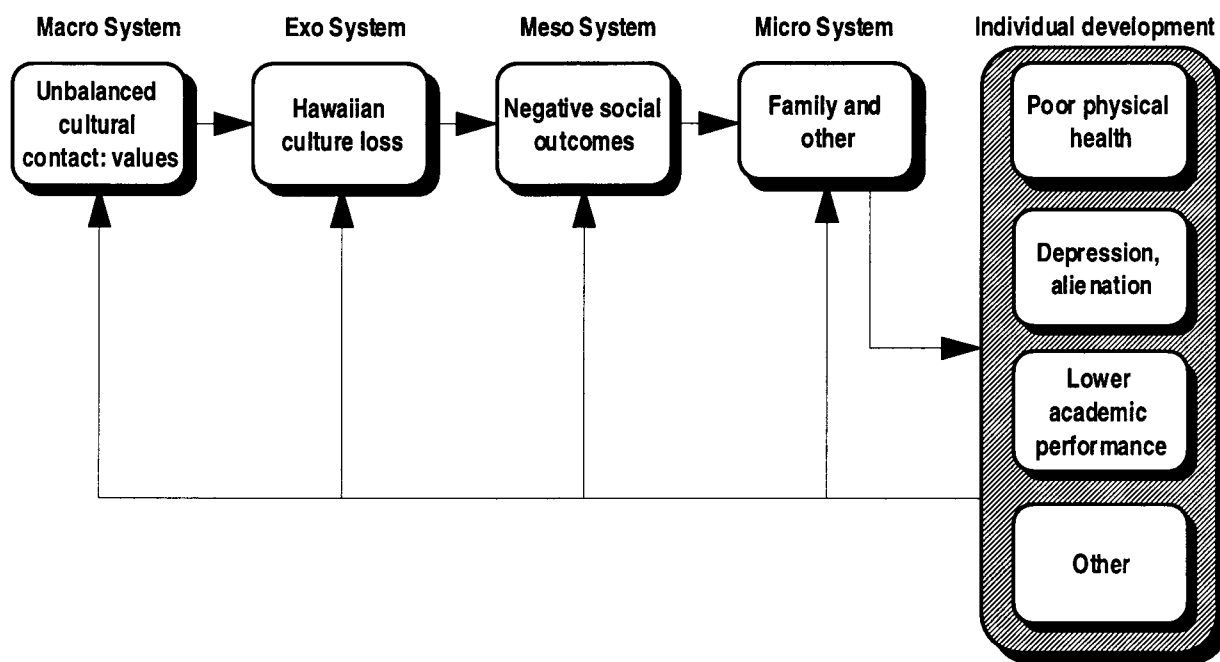
**Figure 2. The Additive Burden Hypothesis Modified: A case of Native Hawaiians**  
(Andrews, Tennant, Hewson and Valliant, 1978; Dohrenwend, 1978; and Kessler, 1979; Rezentos, 1988)



ecological model as a building block, NHEAP proposed a Cultural Loss/Stress Hypothesis (see Figure 3). This model posits a set of behavioral predisposition for depression among modern Hawaiians. This predisposition is hypothesized to be related to the rapid and severe culture loss experienced by Native Hawaiians since the advent of “western culture”. According to NHEAP, disintegration of the Hawaiian culture approximated a “transforming experiment”, a process that naturally depleted the pure Hawaiian population, its traditions, customs, and values. This definition encompasses the negative effects of the breakdown of a culture’s social, economic, religious and political systems that adversely affect group and individual. Bronfenbrenner (1979)

referred to such an abruption as a “systematic alteration and restructuring of existing ecological systems in ways that challenges forms of social organization, belief systems, and lifestyles prevailing in a particular culture or subculture.” Though cultural loss is a superconstruct and difficult to evaluate in quantitative terms, it is reasonable to expect that this experience of loss of Hawaiian heritage contributes to depression among modern Hawaiians. The extreme losses of cultural traditions and customs, the difficulties of reconciling western and Hawaiian values, and the experience of being a disadvantaged minority group in their native land have, in turn, affected perceptions of self-image and well being as a people.

**Figure 3. The Cultural Loss/Stress Hypothesis (NHEAP, 1983)**



Akiskal and McKinney (1973) also propose an approach that views depressive phenomena as neither inherently psychosocial nor biological in origin, but rather as a culmination of a number of possible external stressors describable on several different levels. Although their view supports the western cognitive-affective form of depressive symptomatology, their model is applicable to non-western somatic and other depression disorders of distinct societies. Akiskal and McKinney theorized a "loss of reinforcement" theory (Ferster, 1973; Lewisohn, 1974) of depressive etiology based on behavioral concepts. They postulate... "that depression is the name given to behaviors that result from the loss of major sources of reinforcement." Depression is equated with chronic frustration stemming from environmental stresses that are beyond the coping ability of the individual, who views himself as helpless and finds relief in the rewards of the "sick role." A person placed in a position not by choice, but by external circumstances that dictate the situation, develops frustration resulting from having no recourse to vent the mental suffering. Thus, the developing syndrome that precedes such frustration is "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1974) in which motivational passivity and depression become a form of self-perpetuating coping strategy. This view, regarding the etiology of depression among Native Hawaiians, of the "sick role" and of "learned helplessness" converges with the previously cited models and the findings of Gallimore, et al., that Native Hawaiians were found to be high in external control versus internal control.

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, a review of the models relevant to the etiology of depression among Hawaiians identifies several key elements as contributory risk factors for depressive pathology at the collective group as well as individual levels. First, a critical determinant includes the impact of acculturation and the affect it has had on the traditional cultural infrastructure of the Native Hawaiian people. The models presented by Leighton and Bronfenbrenner outline sequences of events that result from cultural contact between opposing cultures and the acculturative effects that occur at broad group levels. More so, these theoretical paradigms depict the plight of the Native Hawaiian people and provide a conceptual understanding of cultural loss and/or disintegration that takes into account the historical context. In addition, supporting evidence presented suggests that individuals who experience severe cultural or social disintegration would be at high risk for depression.

Second, while Leighton and Bronfenbrenner discuss the effects of acculturation and the psychological implications at the group level, Rezentes investigates the association between psychopathology of depression and stressful life events at a personal level using the Additive Burden Hypothesis Modified. Rezentes concluded that increased psychopathology among lower class individuals were a result of a greater vulnerability to stressful life events. He also reported that psychopathology is contingent upon a person's experience of stressful life events and that social situations and personal dispositions related independently and additively. Rezentes work provides a good model for assessing depression at the individual level and simultaneously evaluates the effects of stressful life events and social and personal variables.

Third, Akiskal and McKinney's theory of "loss of reinforcement" is also relevant to Native Hawaiians because it articulates that depression results from a loss of major sources of reinforcement that influences a person's ability to cope with distress. Such an affect places the individual in a "sick role" which develops into a "learned helplessness" syndrome. This type of syndrome suggests that motivational passivity and depression become learned coping strategies. However, the validity of this research remains to be explicated among Native Hawaiians.

Lastly, a common factor depicted in all of the paradigms is that of external, environmental stressors that influences personal experience and psychopathology, either individually or collectively. These stressors may be considered as stressful life events and evaluated at the individual level as presented by Rezentes. However, it also seems logical that stressful life events can be studied at the group level as well. This implies that a series of stressful life events could possibly constitute a kind of social process, more specifically an acculturative process that results in extreme cultural loss and/or disintegration as defined by Leighton and Bronfenbrenner. Therefore, with respect to Native Hawaiians the detrimental effects of the 1819 abolishment of the Hawaiian *kapu* system, 1848 Great Mahele, and 1893 illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom (Kame'eleihiwa, 1992; Kame'eleihiwa, 1986; Dawes, 1974) has led to cultural disintegration that could have traumatized generations of Native Hawaiians psychologically. The aftermath for many Hawaiians today has been a separation from their land, poor health (refer to E Ola Mau, 1985a; E Ola Mau, 1985b), lower academic achievement (NHEAP, 1983), and loss of cultural identity and political sovereignty (Marsella, Oliveira, Plummer, & Crabbe, 1995).

Perhaps current western conceptualizations of depression do not reflect the Native Hawaiians' view of affective subtypes but can certainly provide some insight into understanding and identifying sources of stressors and potential intervention variables. Given this rationale, recommendations for future research includes: 1) identifying discrete depressive patterns between Native Hawaiians versus non-Hawaiians, 2) assessing the validity of standardized measures of depression among Native Hawaiians, and 3) further study of indigenous Hawaiian states of depressed affect which includes cultural-bound syndromes, assessment criteria, and treatment.

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