THE PERSONAL IS THE PROFESSIONAL
Applying the Trauma-Informed Approach
to Nonprofit Staff

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NPA-622: Non-Profit Data Analysis - Capstone

Spring 2021

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**BACKGROUND**

- **Most clients** of nonprofits have experienced or are experiencing **trauma**

- Nonprofit employees **burn out** working with traumatized clients—and already have **their own trauma histories**

- Trauma-informed approach (**TIA**, aka trauma-informed care) says **trauma is widespread**, workplaces should **support** people with their trauma and **not re-traumatize** through services (Harris and Fallot, 2001)

- But, research suggests nonprofit leaders think about TIA for clients and **forget about TIA for staff**
  - “prolonged silence and a lot of fidgeting and looking around” (Wolf, 2014)

From Pinderhughes et al (2015)
WHAT DOES TRAUMA LOOK LIKE IN NONPROFIT STAFF?

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky
Author, *Trauma Stewardship*

- Trauma without support → burnout
- Burned-out staff
  - a) *leave*, or
  - b) *stay and do bad work*

*Beyond the Cliff*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOzDGrcvmus
Do nonprofit leaders of human services organizations incorporate staff well-being into their efforts to implement the trauma-informed approach (TIA), and if so, in what ways?
METHODS AND APPROACHES

- Qualitative study
- Convenience sampling
- 5 nonprofit leaders
- 3 current, 2 former managers (inc. 2 I used to work with)
- 3 legal services, 2 other direct serv./organizing

- Semi-structured interviews, 45-75 min.
- 2 academic experts studying trauma
- 3 Black women, 2 White women, 1 Asian man (not rep.)
Client and staff trauma are not separate phenomena

Fig. 1
Author’s own framework, based on interviews
FINDINGS: 3 THEMES

- Racism, DEI, & community
- Personal vs. professional identities
- Towards Staff-Facing TIA
THEME: Racism, DEI, & Community

- **Hiring “from the community”** means hiring people with past and present trauma.
  - “If you do believe in broader societal trauma, then the idea that we would hire people from that community who wouldn’t be impacted by it is ridiculous.” (Steinbach)

- **Supporting and retaining staff of color** means recognizing their different exposure to trauma.
  - “In particular Black staff [experienced] watching what was happening [on the news] and feeling like they still needed to show up at work and do their jobs, but then [were dealing with] the trauma of the clients they were also working with.” (Walker)
Many employees **don’t want to** “unlock the box” of personal trauma in the workplace.

- “When you’re in this space, **you’re in a role**. And now there’s this shift ... to: ‘What would it look like to **show up as yourself**?’ ....
- “My authentic self is sometimes **underneath the blankets all day**, reading a book.” (Steinbach)

**Require** staff to engage in discussions of traumatic experiences?

- “Maybe ten percent of folks didn’t want to do it and **deal with their baggage**, or have it dealt with in a **public setting**.” (Ly)
主题：向工作人员展示TIA

- **激情项目**
  - “有些事情**滋养他们**，来平衡其他可能具有挑战性的事情。” (Ly)
  - 热线工作人员能领导了解你的权利培训：“她和那些不一定是经历创伤的人在一起，她能够赋予他们力量。” (Walker)

- **倡导**（包括政策工作和抗议）
  - “它帮助我们看到自己，定义自己，作为变革运动的一部分。”
  - “它真正影响了他们对机构的连接和他们的**希望感**，在长远来看……[它]使他们真正为机构工作感到骄傲。” (Ventura)
THEME: Towards Staff-Facing TIA

- Workloads
  - Even when leaders model work-life balance, “It was very hard for people to say ‘no’ to things … There was a culture of doing everything you could on a case” to prevent a client’s deportation. (Walker)

- From culture of urgency to culture of patience (Steinbach)
  - “It’s really hard to step back and redesign programs.” ....
  - “Patience is expedient” isn’t just about the client in front of you … It is also about changes in organizations … Trauma isn’t worked through in any urgent way.”
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS

1. **Integrate TIA into DEI policies.** Supporting a diverse staff, especially staff of color, means recognizing how trauma impacts specific communities.

2. **Maintain reasonable workloads and flexible schedules.** This might mean more general operations funding. Burned out staff perpetuate a traumatizing work environment.

3. **Don’t rush TIA or expect quick results.** Its implementation should be an ongoing evolution, not a checking of boxes.

4. **Offer a mix of mandatory and opt-in TIA training:** “If you don’t want to be here, it can’t work.” (Steinbach)
REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- My professors at USF
- My classmates
- My wife and editor, Ariana Thompson-Lastad
- My clients, who taught me that working with traumatized people can be healing
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Owen Thompson-Lastad, MNA - Master of Nonprofit Administration - Capstone Project

PURPOSE
To understand how nonprofit leaders at human-services organizations do, and do not, take staff well-being into account when attempting to make their workplaces more trauma-informed. Do they understand their organizations and staff members as existing in the context of communal trauma?

RESEARCH QUESTION
Do nonprofit leaders of human services organizations incorporate staff well-being into their efforts to implement the trauma-informed approach (TIA), and if so, in what ways?

METHODS
- Qualitative study
- Found subjects using convenience sampling
- Semi-structured interviews, 45-75 minutes each
- 5 nonprofit leaders
- Also interviewed 2 academic experts studying trauma

THEMES
- Racism, DEI, and community
  - Trauma affects specific communities differently
  - Retaining staff of color requires TIA
- Personal vs. professional identities
  - Not everyone wants to “unlock the box” at work
  - Expecting “whole selves” vs. establishing shared values
- Towards staff-facing TIA
  - Advocacy & passion projects
  - Culture of patience

RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Integrate TIA into DEI policies.
2. Maintain reasonable workloads and flexible schedules. Adjust funding if necessary.
3. Don’t rush TIA or expect quick results.
4. Offer a mix of mandatory and opt-in TIA training.

REFERENCES

