



UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO
CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

MASTER OF NONPROFIT ADMINISTRATION

THE PERSONAL IS THE PROFESSIONAL

Applying the Trauma-Informed Approach to Nonprofit Staff

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NPA-622: Non-Profit Data Analysis - Capstone

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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)



Photo provided by Jeffrey Smith

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>

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 AND APPROACHES

Qualitative
study

Convenience
sampling

5 nonprofit
leaders

2 Black
women, 2
White women,
1 Asian man
(not rep.!)

Semi-
structured
interviews,
45-75 min.

2 academic
experts
studying
trauma

3 current,
2 former
managers (inc.
2 I used to
work with)

3 legal services,
2 other direct
serv./organizing

Client and staff trauma are not separate phenomena

Community context

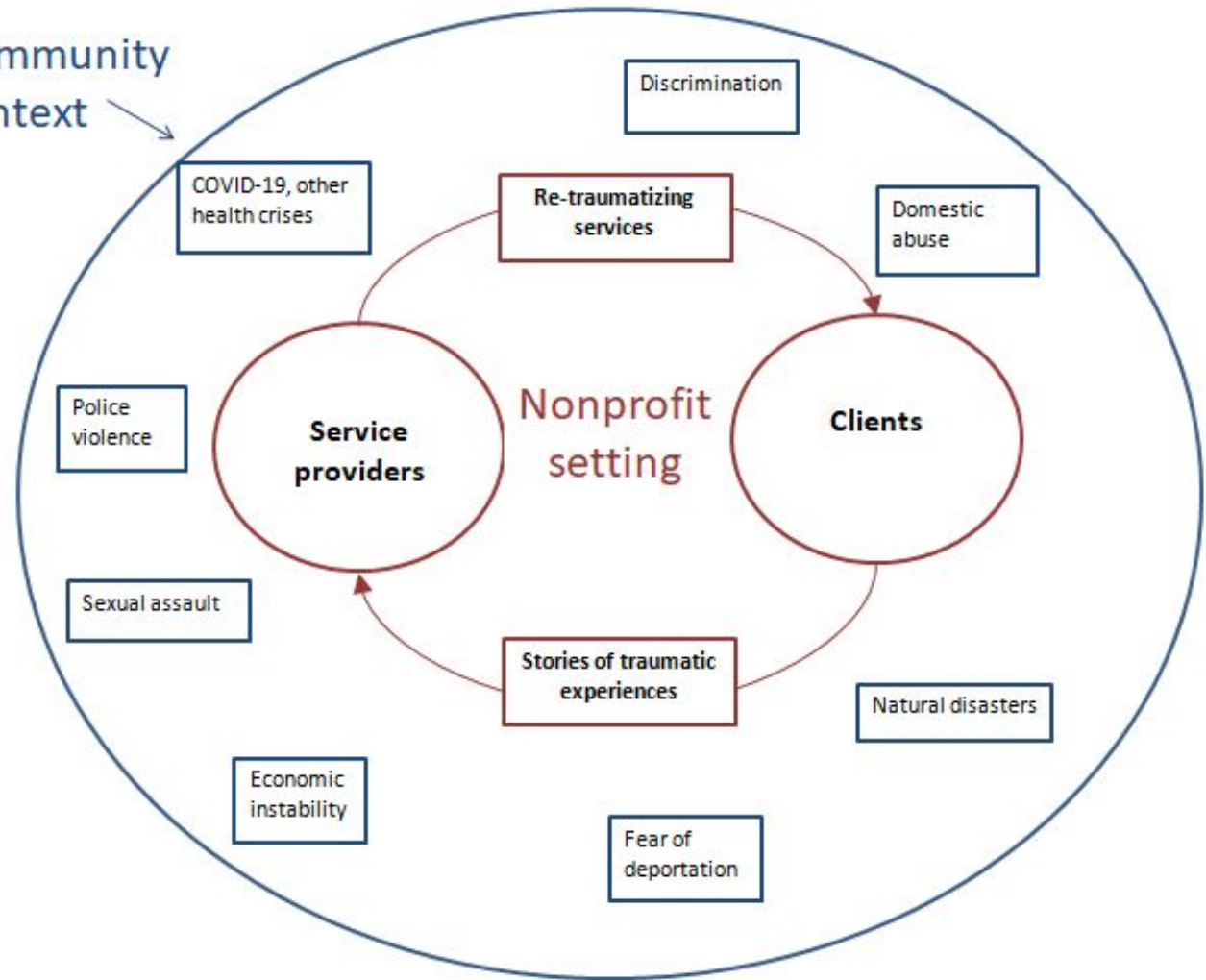


Fig. 1
Author's own framework,
based on interviews

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)

THEME: Professional vs. Personal Identities

- 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)

THEME: Towards Staff-Facing TIA

- **Passion projects**
 - “Something that’s **feeding them, to sort of balance out** other things that might be challenging.” (Ly)
 - Hotline worker got to lead know-your-rights training: “She got **to be with people who weren’t necessarily experiencing trauma**, and she got to empower them.” (Walker)
- **Advocacy** (inc. **policy** work and **protests**)
 - “It helped us see ourselves, define ourselves, as **part of a movement of transformation.**”
 - “It really impacts their connection to the agency and their **sense of hope**, in the long-run ... [It] makes them really **proud** to work for the agency.” (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)

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- My clients, who taught me that working with traumatized people can be healing



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

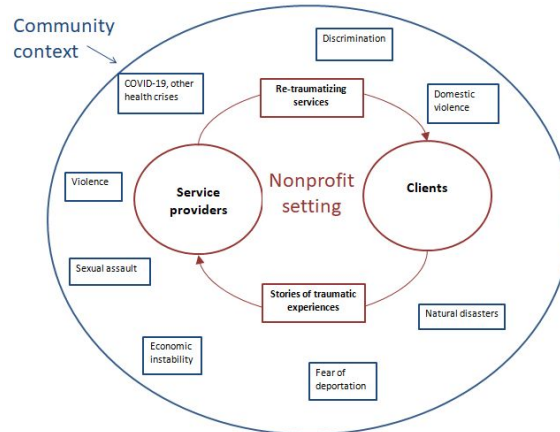
- **Qualitative study**
- Found subjects using **convenience sampling**
- **Semi-structured interviews**, 45-75 minutes each
- **5 nonprofit leaders**
- Also interviewed **2 academic experts** studying trauma

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.**



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