Information Professionals as Social Justice Advocates:

Trauma-Informed Librarianship

Liz Grauel

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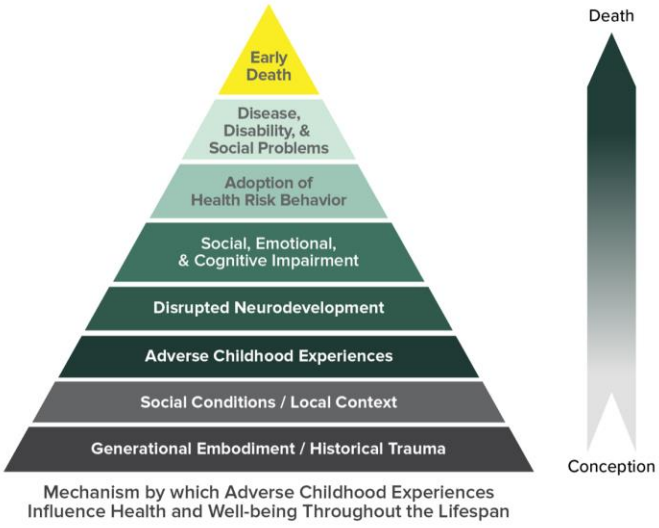
Stated most simply, trauma occurs when one's basic needs for safety are disrupted (Taylor, 2019b). Though its causes vary, the prevalence of trauma is high in the US and its impacts negatively influence the well-being of many who experience it. Fortunately, people who have experienced trauma can heal and thrive with the support of trauma-informed professionals and institutions. The need to transform libraries to better serve our communities has emerged, and this transformation directly promotes core library values guiding our professional ethics. This paper explores how public, school, and academic libraries can benefit from trauma-informed approaches and what it means for a library to be truly trauma-informed.

Understanding Trauma

Trauma broadly refers to overwhelming stress that impacts a person's experience and perception of the environments in which they live (Wilson et al., 2013). Experiencing a significant trauma can cause changes in the way one's brain processes future events. Understanding the neuropsychology of trauma is helpful for building context:

> "When one experiences a trauma, a stress response often occurs. During the event, the parts of the brain that help sequence events and orient one in time may shut down. As a result, the traumatic memory is not integrated like a typical memory, rooted in the past. This causes the brain to respond to moments in daily life as if the initial traumatic event was still happening." (Conley, et al., 2019, p. 531)



The ACE Pyramid (Centers for Disease Control) illustrates the spectrum of lifelong impacts from trauma experienced in childhood.

The causes of trauma vary, ranging from adverse childhood experiences like abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction (Gardner, 2019) to natural disasters and emergencies like mass shootings. Historical trauma, a term created to define trauma symptoms in the children of Holocaust survivors, impacts people and communities who are the children of oppressed or victimized cultural groups (Edwards, 2016).

The experiences and impacts of trauma are unique to each person. Wilson et al. (2013) report that 25% of the US population experienced trauma during childhood and find that many people seeking public assistance have experienced trauma. As our professional and cultural understanding of trauma grows, the need to transform the way we deliver service as librarians and information professionals has emerged.

Trauma-Informed Care

Wilson, et al. (2013), describe the evolution of trauma-informed care through history and how its principles are applicable to many types of organizations. Trauma-informed practices emerged in the feminist movements of the 1970s and became more widely embraced in the 1990s as empirical research of the emotional and physical responses to trauma became more mainstream. P people who have experienced trauma can heal and thrive with the support of trauma-informed professionals, making a strong argument for systematic shifts within organizations that deliver helping services. A trauma-informed organization examines its policies, practices, procedures, and environment to define areas where it can improve its services to be more trauma-sensitive and promote the five core values of trauma-informed care: “(1) safety, (2) trustworthiness, (3) choice, (4) collaboration, and (5) empowerment” (p. 5).

The Five Principles of Trauma-Informed Care (Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care)

Trauma-Informed Libraries

Equity, inclusion, and diversity are values that guide library ethics. Among the goals associated with these values are cultural competence and inclusion, driving librarians and library staff to remove barriers to information and services and to be familiar with the diverse needs and experiences of its community (Hirsh, 2015, Ch 5). Trauma-informed practices embody these principles, weaving cultural competency and deep understanding of the library users' needs together with trauma knowledge and sensitivity.

> "A trauma-informed library is a place where people who have been affected by trauma are welcomed, respected, and helped to find the resources they need, where library staff are supported to understand the challenges of patrons who have experienced trauma and to respond in a positive and non-judgmental way, and where the space of the library itself conveys a message of safety and caring." (Scheyett, 2019)

The Public Library Association Social Work Task Force supports the adoption of a trauma-informed approach in libraries and is focused on training library staff in best practices. Trauma-informed service uses people-first language, emphasizes the strengths of both patrons and library staff, views life challenges with compassion, advocates for systemic changes, focuses on addressing behavior, and creates a welcoming and accessible environment (PLA, 2019). This approach is rooted in social justice and service, transforming libraries into places of trust where all people can access information.

Public, school, and academic libraries differ in the communities and information needs they serve, but each can benefit from trauma-informed approaches. The following sections discuss the influence of a trauma-informed approach on the policies and practices of each type of library and considerations for information professionals in its adoption.

Public Libraries

In the unrest following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the Ferguson Library remained open. Julie Edwards (2016) writes, “Ferguson library director Scott Bonner posted a simple sign in the library: ‘During difficult times, the library is a quiet oasis where we can catch our breath, learn, and think about what to do next’” (p 89). Edwards goes on to describe the notion of the public library as a safe space that can address trauma. The public library is freely accessible to all people in a community. Though its services are fundamentally informative, not curative, the “oasis of space” itself can be restorative.

Since 2010 FEMA has recognized libraries as essential providers of services following natural disasters. Soulen et al. (2020) refer to public libraries as “second responders” that provider survival needs and internet access in times of crisis. Public libraries are uniquely

proficient in adapting their services to address trauma. “Building on this crucial role… the public library also provides opportunities for consistency, socialization, and relationship building…public libraries not only offer physical resources but also a safe haven and return to the ordinary” (p. 31).

Public libraries are distinctly qualified to community needs and connect their users with resources. “Becoming a trauma-informed library is a natural progression of the library’s commitment to the people it serves,” writes Rhiannon Eades (2019, p. 60). She continues, “The public library is a natural fit for a trauma-informed care initiative, as it is considered a safe and welcoming space for all, regardless of a person’s socioeconomic status or life experiences.”

Social workers are becoming the drivers of trauma-informed initiatives in public libraries, focused on supporting libraries in adapting their policies and systems and training library staff to become confident in practicing trauma-informed services. Jean Badalamenti and Elissa Hardy (2019) write, “A trauma-informed approach is a clinical social work approach that provides a framework for addressing behaviors” (p. 9). They explain an approach that treats each library user as an individual with agency and emphasize the importance of providing users with autonomy while establishing clear policies and expectations for behavior in the library.

A trauma-informed approach helps library staff address behaviors and operate with compassion as advised by the PLA Social Work Task Force. “What might appear to be a behavior ‘problem’ may actually be how an individual- including children- has learned to cope in their world” (Taylor, 2019a). A user who has experienced trauma has a different worldview and way of understanding policies and boundaries: “In reality, everyone’s social norms are on a spectrum (note that trauma experiences inform this), and we must be transparent about what our expectations are in the library” (Badalamenti & Hardy, 2019, p. 10).

Public libraries serve everyone, and library staff who are trained to understand trauma and to address behaviors can work with greater confidence. A well-documented initiative in this area is the partnership between the Athens-Clarke County Library and University of Georgia School of Social Work in the Trauma-Informed Library Transformation (TILT) project. The TILT project provides a model that "transforms the library, the place that people trust and where they can get help without stigma, into a place of guaranteed respect, help, and healing" (Scheyett, 2019). TILT is a three-phased approach: first, the MSW students assess the library's community and its current policies, procedures, and practices, provide direct social work services to patrons, and make recommendations for adopting more trauma-informed practices. The second phase focuses on educating library staff, providing knowledge of trauma and training on trauma-informed interactions with library patrons. Finally, the social work and library teams work to transform the library's physical space, programs, and services accordingly (Eades, 2019; Scheyett, 2019).

TILT runs the B.E.E. (Becoming Empowered through Education) Club which supports adolescent girls and provides peer mentoring to help its participants heal from trauma (Eades, 2019; Taylor, 2019a). This is one example of how children and young people also benefit from trauma-informed public libraries. In another example, the Denver Public Library has begun to provide programming for parents of young children to explain the impacts of trauma on brain development (Taylor, 2019a.)

Public libraries operating under a trauma-informed model advocate for social justice and implement practices that support the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion, which removes barriers to information and in turn promotes intellectual freedom. The principles of trauma-

informed approaches are directly aligned with the mission of public libraries. Stated eloquently by the PLA,

> "Our approaches are made even more effective when we create welcoming spaces for customers experiencing life challenges. Our spaces and our resources are available to all-regardless of economic status, housing status, health condition, race, creed, sexual orientation, gender orientation, and more. Our commitment to the public means that we welcome everyone but address behavior separately so that everyone is free to benefit from our work. *We feel this approach reflects the values of librarianship: providing free and equal access to anyone who can benefit*." (2019).

School Libraries

Most literature reports a high rate of childhood trauma in the United States. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are used to define instances of childhood trauma, covering physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, instability in a child's home, bullying, loss of a loved one, and acute crisis like natural disasters and school shootings (Gardner, 2019; Pelayo, 2020; Soulen et al., 2020; Taylor, 2019b). Gardner writes, "forty-five percent of students [have] at least one ACE; twenty-two percent of students [have] multiple ACEs; and one in sixteen students [have] four or more ACEs" (p. E2). Exposure to trauma "appreciably influences brain development and learning" (Taylor, 2019b, p. 37). When learners face ACEs, they may develop chronic fear, even when it appears situationally inappropriate, and they may be unable to trust their environments, the people they encounter, and experience difficulties with forming relationships and understanding social norms (Gardner, 2019). Students impacted by trauma show lower levels of learning readiness and exhibit behavioral problems. They are also more

likely to have issues with school attendance and schoolwork completion. (Gardner, 2019; Soulen et al., 2020; Taylor, 2019b) However, as Gardner and Soulen et al. emphasize, children are resilient. Schools and school librarians can provide students with resources and interventions that increase this resilience and help young people heal from trauma and live healthier lives as adults.

School libraries and librarians are positioned to advocate for trauma-informed policies, procedures, and resources throughout school environments. School librarians have the reach to educate faculty and staff, to build strong relationships with students, and to select books for the library that address the various needs of students who experience trauma and to help them build resilience in response to it.

Gardner emphasizes the value of this reach: "Because the school library serves all learners in the school, it is likely that a proportion of the learners with whom we interact have experienced trauma" (p. E3). Trauma-informed school librarians understand the importance of providing a haven where students can feel supported and learn to build positive relationships. Trauma-informed school libraries educate students on expectations of behavior in the library with consistency so that students know what to expect and feel safe. This goes in hand with trustworthiness and recognizing that young people with ACEs may distrust adults. "In practice, trauma-informed libraries should be predictable environments, with planned transitions, clear boundaries, and explicit behavioral expectations" (Gardner, 2019, p. 39).

A trauma-informed school library is inclusive, supports social and emotional development, and promotes intellectual freedom. "Removing barriers for students with traumas so they can focus on the work they need to do at school is our goal," writes Elizabeth Pelayo (2020, p. 52). It is important to emphasize: school librarians are providers of resources. They are not providing cures for trauma (Gardner, 2019), but are facilitating and championing the effort.

Academic Libraries

With a more specific population and research-centered services, the academic library may not initially come to mind when considering trauma. Trauma-informed academic libraries, however, can help build mental-health initiatives on college campuses and can improve the experience of library users whose experiences impact their ability to seek or receive reference services. "[When] trauma informed, [academic] libraries are uniquely situated to be safe spaces of intellectual freedom. A trauma informed library is a library in which the librarians and staff better understand how to help and serve those library users who have mental health challenges, illnesses, and stresses" (Thomas and Lovelace, 2019, p. 4).

In a study of the learning commons at Hampshire College, Conley et al. (2019) discuss the prevalence of trauma, including historical trauma, in marginalize or oppressed users of academic libraries, and how experiences of trauma "impact one's ability to focus and to feel confident reaching out for help" (p. 536). Thomas and Lovelace echo this, citing the reluctance of users to approach a reference desk.

Trauma-informed approaches in academic libraries are centered in creating safe spaces for its users, which include students, faculty, and staff, to discuss ideas, locate information, and receive support in their research (Thomas and Lovelace, 2019). Hampshire College emphasizes the practice of cultural humility and empowerment, encouraging a focus on fulfilling reference needs without bias.

The literature on trauma-informed librarianship in the context of academic libraries was limited, however the research available emphasized the natural relationship between a trauma-informed approach and core values of the profession. Adapting reference services to meet the needs of a community and operating with cultural competency so that knowledge can be

accessed and expanded emphasizes a dedication to service, intellectual freedom, and equity, diversity, and inclusion in the academic library setting.

Professional Considerations

Librarianship is a "helping profession" and many librarians are in direct contact with people in the throes of traumatic situations. Public librarians are likely to interact with people experiencing homelessness, unemployment, and illness, while school librarians work with children who are hurt and fearful, and academic librarians with young adults in high pressure situations simultaneously learning to navigate adulthood and cultural changes. The librarian's work environment also comes with stressors of its own, including policy and budget concerns, coworker interactions, and work-life balance. The energy required to maintain empathy in these situations can cause librarians and staff in helping professions to experience compassion fatigue (Katopol, 2015).

Related to compassion fatigue are the experiences of Secondary Traumatic Stress (Wilson et al., 2013) and Vicarious Traumatization, or VT. VT occurs in librarians who work with patrons whose traumatic stories transfer onto them (Tolley, 2020). This is different from burnout: "Burnout combines low job satisfaction with feeling both powerless and overwhelmed in the workplace. VT, by contrast, changes our view of the entire world into a scary, negative place" (Tolley, 2020).

The experiences of library staff show another side of trauma-informed approaches, emphasizing the need for staff support and resources. In addition to training employees in trauma-informed librarianship and services, libraries need to create a safe space for their staff to be truly trauma-informed. "Self-care and peer support are essential elements of the trauma-

informed library," Tolley writes (p. 46). Combining individual self-care plans with administrative support and a culture of caring within the library as a workplace is important and enables staff to continue delivering the compassion and empathy to others that is so critical to their community. Eades (2019) notes the library's role as a safe place for change. If the library is to change to a truly trauma-informed institution, it must create a safe place for all- patrons and staff.

Concluding Remarks

The field of trauma research continues to expand, with ever more accessible information available to inform our organizations. As the role of the library evolves with changes in culture and technology, we are experiencing greater intersections of social work, social justice, and librarianship in the US. Adopting a trauma-informed approach to librarianship will allow strengthened relationships within and between professions and so we can better deliver equitable library services to diverse communities, remove barriers to information and learning, and provide inclusive opportunities for all people- an admirable goal for the library of today.

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