TRAUMA-INFORMED CAREER PATHING

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that a significant proportion of Canadian adults have experienced trauma in their lifetime (Joshi et al., 2021; Kealy & Lee, 2018). For example, in a recent study, 45,000 Canadians (61.6%) reported exposure to at least one traumatic "adverse childhood experience" (ACE) and 35.6% reported exposure to two or more (Joshi et al., 2021).

The term "trauma" encompasses both individual and collective forms, which includes systemic and historical trauma. In Canada, collective trauma is disproportionally experienced by racialized and Indigenous communities (Allan & Smylie, 2015; McKenzie, 2017; Poole et al., 2017) as well as migrants and refugees, with an estimated 40% of immigrants coming from countries undergoing war and social trauma having been exposed to traumatic events (Rousseau et al., 2011). While many individuals exposed to traumatic events will heal after reaching safety, for some, there are lasting negative impacts on psychological and social development (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; De La Rue & Ortega, 2019; Nestel, 2012).

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These individual and collective traumas create additional challenges in navigating education and training opportunities as well as the labour market, especially for marginalized communities – who experience high levels of trauma, while also encountering systemic barriers to employment (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Cukier, forthcoming; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). Unfortunately, there is currently a dearth of research on how to develop trauma-informed services to enhance career pathing for Canadian workers, something that we are working to change.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON ADULT EDUCATION

Whereas trauma has been explored in health care settings (Anderson, 2019) as well as youth education (Davidson, 2017; Levi, 2019), its effects on adult education and training are only beginning to be understood. Consequently, many employers and training providers feel "ill-equipped to deal directly with trauma" (Skiba, 2020).

Research into trauma is important for improving the trajectory of adult learners in Canada. Their struggles in education may include unresolved trauma which can result in "deep attitudinal barriers and internalized fear of learning" (Davidson, 2017; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). For example, adverse childhood experiences can cause physiological changes in the developing brain, leading to cognitive losses and behavioural changes (e.g., hyperactivity and poor impulse control) that affect engagement in educational and skills training environments (Burke et al., 2011; Skiba, 2020; Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000; van der Kolk, 2003).

In a study of postsecondary learners, Hoch et al. (2015) (as cited in Davidson, 2017) identified several characteristics of students living with trauma, including:

- Difficulty focusing, attending, retaining, and recalling
- Tendency to miss a lot of classes
- Challenges with emotional regulation
- Fear of taking risks
- Anxiety about deadlines, exams, group work, or public speaking
- Anger, helplessness, or dissociation when stressed
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Involvement in unhealthy relationships

INEQUITY FROM SYSTEMIC AND HISTORICAL TRAUMA

When creating a trauma-informed program for career pathing, it is vital to include considerations of systemic and historical trauma, which affect certain segments of the population more than others.

> "Addressing systemic trauma involves recognition that negative impacts are not felt equally across all segments of society. Members of displaced and marginalized populations – including Black and racialized people, Indigenous Peoples, women, immigrants, and refugees – have often experienced multiple traumas over their lifetime."

"Systemic trauma" can be defined as the impact of institutions and cultures that contribute to widespread trauma, accounting for "contextual features of environments and institutions that give rise to trauma, maintain it, and impact post-traumatic responses" (Goldsmith et al., 2014). Addressing systemic trauma involves recognition that negative impacts are not felt equally across all segments of society. Members of displaced and marginalized populations – including Black and racialized people, Indigenous Peoples, women, immigrants, and refugees – have often experienced multiple traumas over their lifetime (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Cukier, forthcoming; De La Rue & Ortega, 2019; Levi, 2019).

To address this inequity, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) extends their definition of trauma beyond a focus on the individual – advancing a systemic concept of trauma that incorporates de-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive principles (OCASI, 2018). Adult learners who are immigrants from other countries, particularly those who have faced forced migration, experience unique challenges related to systemic trauma (Davidson, 2017; Dessoff, 2011). Research shows how newcomers face major barriers that hinder successful learning experiences, including: "post-traumatic stress and ongoing sense of fear… long bureaucratic processes, disintegration of the family unit, financial difficulties, frequent relocation, and drastic cultural disorientation" (Levi, 2019). A recent study estimated that the prevalence of clinical post-traumatic stress disorder in refugees is approximately 9%, and, while it often goes in hand with depression, it generally has a favourable prognosis, particularly with culturally sensitive psychological treatments (Rousseau et al., 2011). The study recommends a phased approach for refugees focusing on providing practical family and social support to create a sense of safety, noting that care practitioners need to be aware that exposure to traumatic events is likely in newly arrived immigrants and refugees.

"Historical trauma" is a form of systemic trauma that continues to affect specific populations over long periods of time. To put it differently, historical trauma is the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma" (BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council, 2013). Groups of people who have been subjected to "mass trauma – colonialism, slavery, war, genocide – exhibit a higher prevalence of disease even several generations after the original trauma occurred" (Sotero, 2006). In Canada, historical trauma has disproportionately affected Indigenous communities, as a result of colonization, residential schools, and "the '60s Scoop," among other forms of oppression (Poole, 2017).

DESIGNING CULTURALLY SAFE SPACES

To account for the pervasive effects of systemic trauma, culturally safe practices aim to reduce power imbalances that persist in society, while also focusing on individual ideals of respect and self-determination.

Defined in the late 1990s by Irihapeti Ramsden – a Maori nurse in Aotearoa (also known as New Zealand) – a "culturally safe" setting is one in which a person "experiences spiritual, social, emotional, and physical safety… It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening" (Ramsden, 2002).

Culturally safe spaces in Canada recognize that different populations that live on this land – including new immigrants (Ng & Gagnon, 2020), Black and racialized people (Diversity Institute, 2019; Environics Institute et al., 2017), Indigenous peoples (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; OECD, 2018), and persons with disabilities (Morris et al., 2018; Tompa et al., 2020) – have different needs and ways of thinking, which will affect the appropriateness and effectiveness of skills training programs.

As such, representatives from different communities should be present at the leadership level of new educational and training programs; to ensure that their perspectives are reflected in curricula as well as top-level decision-making (Terare, 2019). This demonstrates a respect for multiple forms of knowledge in the design of policy and practice alike (Poole et al., 2017).

ESTABLISHING TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED APPROACHES

Trauma Informed Care (TIC) is a model established by Harris and Fallot (2001), which enshrines five guiding principles for services: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants has developed guidelines for advancing this sense of collaboration – called Trauma and Violence Informed Approaches (TVIA) (OCASI, 2018) – that acknowledge the connections among various forms of violence, trauma, and negative life consequences. OCASI aims to support new pathways for self-care, resilience, and community-building through the four principles of TVIA:

1. **Generalist Practice:** establishing "universal trauma precautions" to provide positive supports for all people, recognizing that everyone can be dealing with invisible trauma.

2. **Preventing Re/Traumatization:** having the mandate of "doing no harm" as the basis of all policies and practices.

3. **Fostering Safety:** committing to create and ensure emotional, physical, psychological, interpersonal, social, cultural, and systemic safety for all people.

4. **Continuing Growth and Community Building:** incorporating a strength-based approach and fostering opportunities for choice, collaboration, and connection.

Another example is the guidance on trauma-informed and culturally appropriate approaches to workplaces developed by the Native Women's Association of Canada (2019). The report identifies the importance of Elders in organizations with Indigenous employees, as they provide spiritual and emotional support in addition to bringing knowledge of the land, culture and ceremony to the workplace. Through understanding Indigenous intergenerational trauma and its present-day impacts, Elders have the ability to empathize, acknowledge and validate the trauma the person has suffered.

The Manitoba Trauma Information and Education Centre (2017) has also developed resources that can assist with trauma-informed career pathing in the form of an organizational self-assessment and a toolkit which outlines the steps and processes to becoming a trauma-informed organization. The toolkit is structured around four criteria: overall policy and program mandates (including a clearly written policy statement, evidence-informed practices, leadership style, etc.); hiring practices (trauma general awareness training, including trauma content in job description, etc.); policies and procedures (e.g., policies on minimizing retraumatization); and monitoring and evaluation.

In the United States, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in the Department of Health and Human Services (SAMHSA) is a recognized leader in this area. With the objective of supporting systems to become more trauma-informed, SAMHSA developed guidance for an organizational trauma-informed approach, which builds upon Harris and Fallot's foundational model. This guidance is organized around ten domains for implementing and sustaining a trauma-informed approach within an organization, which include:

- governance and leadership;
- policy;
- the physical environment;
- engagement and involvement;
- cross sector collaboration;
- screening, assessment, and treatment services;
- training and workforce development;
- progress monitoring and quality assurance;
- financing; and
- evaluation (SAMHSA, 2014).

CASE STUDY: CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY REHABILITATION PLAN (CIRP)

Founded in the 1980s, CIRP is an early example of trauma-informed practices in Canada, establishing addiction treatment resources for the unionized construction industry. The program has continually evolved and expanded over 35 years, providing mental health services for the workplace that are grounded in up-to-date evidence on substance abuse.

CIRP has grown to 40,000 members as of 2021. Its main service offering is trauma counselling to workers, while also actively educating employers on how to be allies around mental health. By training management and peers to use language that is non-stigmatizing, CIRP establishes safe spaces for workers while actively spreading awareness of the damaging effects of "negative labelling" on recovery.

> "My recovery has both good and bad days. Whatever the baseline, every single one of my therapy sessions improves my day and equips me with tools for tomorrow."–CIRP Client

When approaching employers about trauma-informed methods, CIRP recommends starting at the most basic level with management, who may have no prior experience with inclusive policies. By having external evaluators – such as health care professionals and academic researchers – conduct on-site evaluations of company procedures, employers can begin the process of updating their practices to become trauma-informed.

CASE STUDY: WORK THERAPY PROGRAMS FOR SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA, ABUSE AND/OR VIOLENCE

Work therapy programs, such as the Canadian Women's Foundation's "The Way Out" initiative, are another example of trauma-informed career support. In addition to providing skills training, therapeutic work programs provide social and emotional support for survivors of trauma and people that experience persistent mental health challenges. Thus, participants not only develop skills that would increase their capacity to obtain and maintain meaningful employment, they are also provided with a sense of purpose and normalcy.

One of the main objectives of "The Way Out" is to build self-confidence and independence for survivors of trauma. The program provides barrier-free service to women and LGBTQ2S+ people. It equips participants with skills and strategies for adapting to new work placements that build on their strengths at their own pace. This supportive and nurturing environment sets a foundation for healing and empowers survivors to reclaim their lives after trauma, abuse and/or violence.

CASE STUDY: ESSENTIAL SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT READINESS PROGRAMS FOR INDIGENOUS LEARNERS

Imagination FX is an Indigenous-owned organization based in British Columbia that specializes in leadership, coaching and organizational development. Many of their projects are implemented through tripartite relationships and focus on providing essential skills and employment readiness programs to Indigenous participants. An important component of these programs is that the initial assessment of participants includes an evaluation of their strengths as well as challenges, taking into account their past and present trauma. The assessment considers challenges such as access to transportation and childcare, experience or family's experience with residential schools, substance abuse and criminal activity. The program itinerary is designed to provide skills and activities that respond to the top three challenges identified by the cohort, including holistic supports for substance abuse, grief and mental health.

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES TO CAREER PATHING

Building on the research that has been done on trauma as well as our understanding of the ways in which it affects different populations and individuals, we propose applying a trauma-informed approach to supporting diverse groups through the entire career pathing process.

The goal of trauma-informed career pathing is to understand that different individuals are starting at different points and need different levels of support during their pathway to employment and advancement. Adapting Escobari's model (Figure 1), Cukier (forthcoming) proposes that we recognize the different stages in pathways to employment – user entry (the decision to pursue employment or careers), building self-efficacy, navigating the career and employment system, overcoming social and economic barriers (which are often overlooked), accessing teaching and content, securing employment and sustaining support and advancement – may all be experienced differently by people suffering from the effects of trauma.

For many, even coming to the decision to try to advance their education or secure a career may be overwhelming. Self-efficacy may be damaged and significant efforts may be needed to build confidence and actively support the ability to be persistent and resilient when facing barriers. Experiences of systemic discrimination produce different relationships with institutions and discourage people from even trying to progress their careers. For example, while over 90% of Black youth would like to attend university, over 40% of Black students do not apply to a postsecondary institution (Diversity Institute, 2021). Moreover, the response to failure or rejection when applying for an educational opportunity or job may be very different for someone who has experienced trauma. The most vulnerable in our society are most likely to have experienced trauma and are the least likely to have the resources to address its impact. Even the approaches to the design and delivery of educational programming and the processes of recruitment need to take this into account.

CONCLUSION

In a job market that is changing rapidly, opportunities to acquire new skills must be accessible to all adult learners. An

FIGURE 1. THE END-TO-END RESKILLING JOURNEY



Source: Adapted from Escobari, M. Seyal, I. Meaney, M. (n.d.) Realism About Reskilling: Upgrading the career prospects of America's low-wage workers. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Realism-about-Reskilling_Brookings_Overview-FOR-WEB.pdf. Page 13.

important starting point for building such an inclusive job market is the development of a better understanding of the extent of trauma, including intergenerational trauma, affecting certain populations. There are examples of trauma-informed approaches in working with Indigenous communities, in working with victims of violence, and in working with immigrant and refugee populations and their children. However, more attention to, and research on, the impact of trauma on racialized and particularly Black populations is needed, as they are more likely to have been victims of racism and to have been exposed to violence. The ways in which layers of identity interact are also not well understood nor generally considered in designing and delivering career counselling, skills development and utilization.

> "By emphasizing personal growth and skill acquisition through an "asset-based" approach, rather than symptom management, trauma-informed practices can foster true collaboration between employers, training providers, and workers."

Addressing the disparities in labour market outcomes experienced by Indigenous, racialized and other disadvantaged people when compared to other groups in Canadian society requires action to address collective trauma and discrimination across Canada. Advancements in career pathing require a foundational shift in how training providers understand the effects of systemic and historical trauma on adult learners. By emphasizing personal growth and skill acquisition through an "asset-based" approach, rather than symptom management, trauma-informed practices can foster true collaboration between employers, training providers, and workers (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021).

Business leaders in Canada can also step up by building a sense of shared responsibility for the physical, social, cultural, and emotional safety of all workers. This will result in significant benefits for companies and employees: minimizing the risk of individual and group re-traumatization, while also generating returns on investment in terms of increased productivity, workplace diversity, and community participation.

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