TRAUMA INFORMED CARE: SUPPORTING INTEGRATION INTO CANADA'S LABOUR MARKET FOR REFUGEES

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The experiences of newcomers and refugees are riddled with trauma. Whether it be the precarious conditions that lead to forced displacement, the difficulties associated with international travel in times of crisis, or the anxiety produced by being in unfamiliar surroundings, trauma must be centralized when programming pathways to employment for recent immigrant populations. In the workplace, flashbacks, and other intrusive and distressing thoughts produced by traumatic experiences surrounding resettlement may impede performance, limit self-advocacy and hinder the development of professional relationships. These symptoms negatively impact our sense of self-worth, limit our ability to maintain existing relationships and reduce opportunities that would otherwise lead to productive and fulfilling work lives.[1] When considered over an extended period of time, trauma effects overall work experiences. But, beyond stunting the growth of our resume, trauma effects how we engage with recruiters, how we interview and how we think about the future of our careers.[2]

The experience of trauma significantly differs within immigrant and refugee communities.[3] For example, the traumatic effects produced by the complex and continuous lived adversity of war, natural disasters, persecution and political conflict, are very different from the consequences stemming from a single exposure to an isolated traumatic event.[4] In fact,

1 Kaylee Seddio, "Trauma, Psychopathology, and the Refugee Crisis: A Call to Action," *Am J Public Health* 107, no. 7 (2017): 1044–1045, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5463241

2 Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), "Understanding the Impact of Trauma," in *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*, ed. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014), www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191

3 Grace Verbeck, "Examining the Evidence for a Dissociative Subtype of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," (PhD Diss., Alliant International University, 2014; Judith Lewis Herman, "Complex PTSD: A Syndrome in Survivors of Prolonged and Repeated Trauma," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 5, no. 3 (1992): 377-391. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/bf00977235

4 Evangelia Giourou, Maria Skokou, Stuart Andrew, Konstantina Alexopoulou, Philippos Gourzis and Eleni Jelastopulu," Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: The Need to Consolidate a Distinct Clinical Syndrome or to Reevaluate Features of Psychiatric Disorders Following Interpersonal Trauma?," *World J Psychiatry* 8, no. 1 (2018): 12-19, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5862650

trauma is not only associated with forced displacement, but also with the nuances of resettlement and the unavoidable contact with new things, people and lifestyles.[5]

We must recognize each individual's experiences of trauma and apply compassion and holistic methods to validate the impact of suffering, while ensuring pathways for post-traumatic growth. Trauma Informed Care (TIC) provides an opportunity to embrace the immigrant and refugee's experience with the world around them and provide support strategies that attempt to mitigate and breakdown distress.[6] TIC empowers individuals to reshape their lives by minimizing and eliminating the barriers that accompany acute or severe traumatic-invoked stress. TIC develops individualized, comprehensive, and holistic strategies that work to acknowledge personal narratives in order to recognize the triggers that exacerbate symptoms. Coping strategies and safe spaces offer, in this context, ways to promote mental health and healing. TIC returns dignity to the sufferer by assigning value to their lived experiences as survivors. This approach provides the autonomy and self-advocacy necessary to seek support and grow as part of the Canadian workforce.[7]

REFUGEE POPULATIONS AND THE IMPACT OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS ON EMPLOYMENT

There are numerous factors that contribute to the challenges of immigration. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with social norms, financial burdens, lack of employment opportunities, unaccredited degrees or certifications, and the sheer geographical distance from loved ones are but a few of the obstacles experienced by newcomers. Of course, not all immigrant experiences are the same. Refugees, for example, are forced to emigrate. Environmental and political catastrophes push people from their homes and into neighbouring countries where resettlement supports are often uneven and unpredictable.[8] Many refugees find themselves separated from host populations in overcrowded encampments, where inadequate healthcare, housing, education, and employment opportunities reduce both autonomy and dignity. Protracted stays in refugee camps multiply experiences of complex trauma produced through continued exposure to adversity.[9] Afghan refugees, for example, are forced to leave a an environment ridden with human rights violations, oppressive regulations on women and young girls, limitations on education, and restrictions on exercising freedom of speech and expression. When arriving in neighbouring Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, however, they encounter precarious refugee supports coupled with the continued threat of persecution.[10]

Seeking employment in a new country represents one of the most important challenges for newcomers during resettlement. The experiences associated with trauma add to the complexities of performing job searches in new places, in new cultures and new languages. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is caused by the lasting effects of traumatic events, and it is often associated with unpredictable changes in mood and behavior, limited sleep, loss of appetite, irritability, avoidance, suicidal ideations, as well as depression and anxiety. In addition to these experiences, sufferers of trauma, in many cases, also experience what is known as "survivors guilt." Catastrophic events and political crises often produce casualties. In this context, survival, like death, is inexplicable and riddled with stress and anxiety.[11]

In many cases, however, treatment and healing are luxuries that are not afforded to refugees. The recent controversy surrounding the lack of available housing in the Greater Toronto Area, in July 2023, forced newcomers from Africa to take refuge in tents throughout the metropolitan area. This just one example of the precarity of resettlement.[12]

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5 Oliver Bakewell, "Encampment and Self-settlement," in *Oxford Handbook of Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 127–138.

6 "What is Trauma-informed Care?," University at Buffalo School of Social Work, accessed October 24, 2022, https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html#:~:text=Trauma-Informed%20Care%20(TIC),individual's%20life-%20including%20service%20staff

7 Renee C. Lovell, David Greenfield, George Johnson, Kathy Eljiz and Sue Amanatidis, "Optimising Outcomes for Complex Trauma Survivors: Assessing the Motivators, Barriers and Enablers for Implementing Trauma Informed Practice within a Multidisciplinary Health Setting," *BMC Health Services Research* 22, no. 434 (2022): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-022-07812-x

8 Stephen A. Matlin, Anneliese Depoux, Stefanie Schütte, Antoine Flahault and Luciano Saso, "Migrants' and Refugees' Health: Towards an Agenda of Solutions, *Public Health Reviews* 39, no. 27 (2018): 1-55, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-018-0104-9

9 Simon Turner, "What is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 2 (2016): 139-148, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev024

10 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023: Rights trends in Afghanistan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2023), www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan

11 "What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?," American Psychiatric Association, accessed August 10, 2023. https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd

12 Patrick Swadden, "Asylum Seekers left Sleeping on Toronto Streets Amid Funding Stalemate between City, Feds," *CBC News*, July 12, 2023, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-asylum-seekers-shelter-stalemate-1.6903827

The lack of access to culturally appropriate, trauma-informed mental health supports represents a significant barrier to the successful settlement of refugees in Canada. Cultural norms and stigma within both the refugee and host communities effect how refugees deal with mental health challenges. In order to have adequate mental health support, front line service workers must be able to demonstrate cultural competency. Despite growing efforts to address mental health as part of disability, accessibility and inclusion strategies, there appears to be a limited understanding within Western cultures around mental health issues, which results in stigma and marginalization. These challenges are amplified when both shame and stigma become associated with mental illness in refugee communities. For example, the Arabic language has a limited vocabulary around depression, anxiety, trauma, or mental health. Those displaying symptoms are labeled crazy, possessed, or weak, which makes seeking professional support a shameful act.[13] In a systematic review on mental health stigma in the Pacific Rim region (e.g., Japan, South Korea, China, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia), we see similar conclusions. Here, negative attitudes surrounding mental illness worsen mental health outcomes.[14] Often associated with psychosis and the supernatural, stigma and the discrimination of mental illness prevent treatment altogether and result in shame and concealment. For example, stigma around mental health is widespread and is associated with black magic and the supernatural in Pakistan.[15] As a result, mental health concerns are discriminated against within educational institutions, healthcare systems and personal networks.[16] Cultural competency in this area aids in the creation of holistic settlement plans for refugee populations that are focussed on addressing the trauma associated with the urgent travel in moments of crisis.

Employment is an urgent matter for the refugee and newcomer populations and is essential to improving their quality of life and ensuring that they can successful resettlement. Pathways to employment, however, are riddled with barriers. Negative stereotypes, bias and discrimination, along with difficulties associated with the transfer of foreign credentials add to the struggles of living with trauma in a new country. Trauma Informed Career Pathing offers an opportunity to support refugees in this process and throughout interviewing, resume building, up-skilling, and language training periods of the job search process.

TIC AND PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT

TIC can be a powerful tool to help inform how we approach workplace Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives, particularly in relation to refugees, but also other populations. Its practices can be used to support inclusive recruitment efforts, workplace environments, professional development, as well as leadership.[17] Trauma Informed Career Pathing is one technique for how TIC can be used to improve the professional lives and general well-being of trauma sufferers in the workplace.[18] Trauma Informed Career Pathing supports the experiences of diverse populations by acknowledging and prioritizing post-traumatic stress, as well as validating the individual's experiences, past and present. The career pathing journey includes many steps, including: encouraging the creation of flexible and accessible user entryways, building self-efficacy, navigating career options and system nuances, assisting with economic and social barriers, and providing content-specific and culturally competent training and sustainable support frameworks. TIC can be applied to every component of the career pathing journey.

A TIC approach to employment focuses on providing opportunities for these populations to view themselves as survivors and not victims of the various challenges and adversities they have endured. A collaborative approach works to eliminate power dynamics and prioritize respect and dignity to build self-worth and general well-begin among trauma sufferers[19] Trauma Informed Career Pathing offers refugee populations

13 Dana Al Laham, Engy Ali, Krystel Mousally, Nayla Nahas, Abbas Alameddine and Emilie Venables, "Perceptions and Health-Seeking Behaviour for Mental Illness Among Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Community Members in Wadi Khaled, North Lebanon: A Qualitative Study," *Community Ment Health J* 56 (2020), 875–884, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-020-00551-5

14 Mao-Sheng Ran, Brian J. Hall, Tin Tin Su, Benny Prawira, Matilde Breth-Petersen, Xu-Hong Li and Tian-Ming Zhang, "Stigma of Mental Illness and Cultural Factors in Pacific Rim Region: A Systematic Review," *BMC Psychiatry* 21, no. 8 (2021): 1-16, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02991-5

15 Ibid.

16 Lee Knifton, Mhairi Gervais, Karen Newbigging, Nuzhat Mirza, Neil Quinn, Neil Wilson and Evette Hunkins-Hutchison, "Community Conversation: Addressing Mental Health Stigma with Ethnic Minority Communities," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 45, no. 4 (2009): 497–504, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-009-0095-4

17 "What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?," American Psychiatric Association, accessed August 10, 2023. https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd

18 "Trauma Informed Career Pathing," Diversity Institute and Future Skills Centre (*Canadian Diversity* - A Publication of the Association of Canadian Studies, 2021), 17-19.

19 Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (WCSAP), *Creating Trauma-Informed Services: A Guide for Sexual Assault Programs and their System Partners* (Pasco, WA: Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, 2018), www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018-04/Trauma-Informed-Advocacy.pdf

the autonomy to navigate employment prospects, while equipping them with the skills and tools necessary to understand accreditation systems, specific sector opportunities, as well as context specific information to help build knowledge around employment in Canada.

Assisting refugee populations with economic and social barriers, is at the root of TIC. It acknowledges the importance of a holistic approach and identifies the risk factors that may impede career progression. In this context, wrap-around supports help to mitigate the social, economic, cultural, familial, linguistic, and the psychological hardships that refugee populations endure. In sum, career pathing with a TIC lens, works toward building equitable and inclusive workplace environments that not only welcome refugee populations, but provide them with the necessary tools to be self-sufficient and thrive in their personal and professional lives.

The " Pathways to Employment" initiative at the Diversity Institute and Future Skills Centre provides an example of Trauma Informed Care supports for refugee populations. Here, newcomer job seekers are introduced to a job-matching platform that allows them to create a profile that details all of their skills, experiences, education, and interests. From there, users navigate through existing job opportunities and are matched with existing vacancies that fit their profile. The jobseekers are connected to Canadian organizations that have committed to diversifying their workforces and embracing foreign talent. One critical component of this project is enabling the job seekers to understand their trauma from forced displacement or migration as an asset and not a shortcoming. Employers also benefit as they learn to understand the experiences of refugees as advantageous to the workforce. The resiliency, resourcefulness, willingness to adapt to constantly changing environments, and goal-oriented attitudes of refugees are all shown to be invaluable additions to any workforce. The Pathways to Employment program has worked, most recently, with Afghan refugees. and has helped individuals to recognize how to translate their personal experiences into skill-sets that are transforming their lives in Canada.

TIC allows refugees to understand and embrace the barriers and hardships they have endured. Similarly, it teaches employers to reframe how they think about skills. For example, instead of seeking out candidates that have work experience in Canada and/or Canadian credentials, TIC encourages employers to consider alternative ways to assess the competencies needed for the job. Candidates who have endured war and conflict, survived forced displacement, successfully resettled in a new country, and have learned another language become examples of resilience and innovation who are capable of working in a fast-paced environment, learning new skills, meeting tight deadlines, and so much more.

Working with both job-seekers and employers from a trauma-informed lens, the Pathways to Employment program empowers job-seekers and employers to value the newcomer talent pool.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Trauma Informed Care can significantly enhance efforts to support not only newcomers and refugees, but all equity deserving groups. It offers opportunities to prioritize the dignity and humanity of trauma sufferers and to recognize the skills required to overcome adversity. In this context, victims become survivors as they work to regain control over their lives. When adopted in the workplace, TIC supports inclusion, equity, and for personal and professional growth on all sides. Through Trauma Informed Care we are able to learn to appreciate the experiences of crisis in order to appropriately respond to the emerging needs of these populations.

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