



Trauma-Informed Field Instruction and Models of Practice

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Introduction

This review examines the application of a trauma-informed perspective to field education programs and models of supervision. There are many dimensions to this topic. While there is emerging literature on trauma-informed social work supervision and field instruction (Berger & Quiros, 2016; Knight, 2018) there remains minimal exploration of how a trauma-informed model of care can be applied to a social work field education model.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your understanding of trauma-informed practice?
2. How do you promote a trauma-informed perspective in your field education program?
3. In field placements, how do you support students with a significant history of trauma?
4. How do you infuse a trauma-informed perspective into your field placement seminars?

Emerging Literature

Trauma-Informed Perspective

Berger and Quiros (2016) have defined trauma-informed practice as a “system of care that demonstrates an understanding and recognition of trauma as both interpersonal and sociopolitical and is, therefore, aligned with principles of social justice” (p. 145).

Berger and Quiros (2016) suggest that organizations create systems and structures (i.e., policies, mission statements, and strategic initiatives) that promote a trauma-informed perspective and organizational culture. Such an organizational culture, the authors say, will build on the five core tenets of a trauma-informed perspective: 1) safety, 2) trustworthiness, 3) choice, 4) collaboration, and 5) empowerment.

Trauma-Informed Social Work Supervision

In May 2018, Carolyn Knight and Diane Borders curated a special edition of *The Clinical Supervisor* that highlighted the subject of trauma-informed social work supervision. This unique publication explored the challenges of applying a trauma-informed lens in this area. In it, various authors from a range of settings applied a trauma-informed perspective to social work supervision models. For example, Collins-Camargo and Antle (2018) suggested that child welfare supervisors promote a supervisory model that is trauma-informed and, at its core, reflective in nature. Johnson, Johnson, and Landsinger (2018) showcased the unique trauma that comes with working in a military setting. Veach and Shilling (2018) explored how hospital settings, by their very nature, are trauma-informed through encounters with the physical aspects of trauma.

Trauma-Informed Field Supervision

Carolyn Knight is a pioneer for the subject of trauma-informed care within the context of field instruction. Her analysis (Knight, 2018) explored the specific realities of integrating a trauma-informed lens when supervising students. Building upon Kadushin and Harkness' (2002) model of social work supervision, Knight suggests that field instructors promote the following core principles when supervising interns: 1) knowledge about trauma; 2) safe and supportive relationships; and 3) an overarching atmosphere that attends to the five tenets of a trauma-informed perspective (see above).

Tarshis and Baird (2018) have explored the unique complexities of looking through a trauma-informed lens in field placement settings relating to intimate partner violence. Their conceptual analysis suggests that social workers and, by extension, social work interns, may be at risk for indirect trauma because of a lack of training and inadequate professional understanding of trauma. Tarshis and Baird (2018) promote the importance of field instructors providing a safe space for interns to explore their own possible intersecting histories of trauma. Berger, Quiros, and Benavidez-Hatzis (2018) explore the complexities of providing trauma-informed supervision when there may be a power imbalance relating to race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, class,

and other social affiliations. Berger et al. (2018) promote trauma-informed supervision that is safe, non-judgmental, and a mechanism for promoting authentic conversations in supervision that offer voice to these complex challenges.

Trauma-Informed Field Education

Knight (2019) has implored social work education programs to promote the tenets and training of trauma-informed practice with both field instructors and students alike. She suggests that field instructors should be provided with specific strategies for integrating the five core tenets of trauma-informed practice into their weekly supervision sessions with interns. Knight (2019) also suggests that social work educational programs should understand and recognize that many field instructors will not be working in an organizational context that supports a trauma-informed perspective. Training and supporting field instructors to navigate potential challenges within their organizational context is therefore required. The Council on Social Work Education (2012) highlighted the complex role played by trauma-informed practitioners and organizations. This position paper creates an intersecting conceptualization of trauma-informed practice with the nine-core social work educational competencies.

There remains a dearth of evidence and teaching frameworks that support our understanding of the pedagogical challenges of teaching trauma perspectives to social work students. Gilin and Kauffman (2015) conducted an important analysis of the trauma history of graduate social work students. Their findings helped to create a learning culture that supports and embraces our understanding of the impact of trauma on ourselves and the clients with whom we work. Other researchers have employed the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998), which includes ten adverse childhood experiences: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, exposure to domestic violence, household substance abuse, and household mental illness. Gilin and Kauffman (2015) found that 80% of graduate-level social work students (from a total of 162) had an ACE score of at least 1. This finding became the genesis for important social work educational teaching strategies, including a focus on helping students understand the theoretical and practical applications of trauma, self-care development plans, opportunities for reflective learning, and integrating trauma theory to practice.

Emerging grey literature suggests that while there remains an interest in training social workers in, and facilitating their understanding of, the concepts and application of a trauma-informed lens in social work field education (University at Buffalo School of

Social Work, 2019), little specific attention is being given to the actual on-the-ground application of trauma-informed field education perspectives. Issues such as matching, recruiting, and retaining field instructors and agencies require a trauma-informed lens. Field placements that do not support or understand a trauma-informed perspective may be at odds with field education models of supervision.

Field education models require a layered approach to being trauma-informed with both students and field instructors alike. The field seminar is a space in which social work educators can begin to instruct students and support their knowledge of trauma-informed practice. Simple strategies for this can include developing class ground rules centered around the five core tenets of trauma-informed practice and holding specific seminars and readings that enrich students' understanding of the selected material and its impact on them. An emerging feature in the literature highlights the concept of vicarious resilience – helping professionals who are positively affected by witnessing the courage of clients navigate issues of trauma (Hernández, Engstrom, & Gangsei, 2010). Helping students recognize their own resilience in the face of others' trauma history is an important concept to understand and integrate into one's practice.

Field education faculty require an understanding of trauma as it relates to students, but also as it relates to the training, support, and development of field instructors. Regular training can feature the tenets of trauma-informed practice. But beyond focused attention to training, faculty can support field instructors by facilitating dialogue and peer support to promote a deeper appreciation of how trauma may have affected students' own lives and their evolving relationships with clients. Faculty site visits can promote the use and language of the five core tenets of trauma-informed practice.

Summary

This literature review highlights the complexity and necessity of integrating a trauma-informed perspective into social work field education. Incorporating a trauma-informed lens into the practice of field instructors, field educational curriculum, and program development is the next required step in our profession. Further conceptual and empirical research on developing and implementing evidence-based trauma-informed models of practice into social work field education programs will help us to break through this next frontier of our evolving profession.

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