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Trauma-Informed Interview Coaching: An Innovative Approach to Achieve Equal Opportunity and Social Justice in Field Education

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“Poor people, people of color especially, are much more likely to be found in prison than in institutions of higher education.” - Angela Davis*

**From Now on The News with Maria Hiniyosa interview with Angela Davis on February 23, 2007. Full interview text available at <http://www.pbs.org/now/news/308-transcript.html>*

Introduction

In 2018, field faculty at the University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work launched a pilot project called *Trauma-Informed Interview Coaching* (TIIC). The project’s goals were to support justice-involved MSW students during the field placement process, to decrease failed agency interviews, and to reduce agency replacements. This project is ongoing and data on its outcomes are being collected and evaluated.

A Need Identified

Research indicates that students in social work programs have experienced more trauma in comparison to their peers studying business and medicine (Black, Jeffreys, & Hartley, 1993). Further, research on the school-to-prison pipeline demonstrates a significant correlation between adverse childhood experiences, criminal behavior, and

arrest (Kochly, 2016). Formerly incarcerated college students “are overwhelmingly focused on helping others - particularly vulnerable and underserved populations” (Halkovic & Greene, 2015, p. 13). It stands to reason, then, that schools of social work educate a multitude of students with trauma and those who have overcome obstacles and barriers, including those with carceral histories. And yet, having justice-involved backgrounds may prevent MSW students from securing field placements. More than half of agencies hosting MSW students require a background check as part of their vetting processes and will not consider students with criminal-justice backgrounds (Dottin 2018). More than half of field directors have described challenges placing students with carceral system histories (Brodersen, Swick, & Richman, 2009).

Social Justice is listed as the second of six social work values according to the National Association of Social Workers (2017) *Code of Ethics*. Social work education must reflect our ethical and professional principles and necessitates that social work educators challenge injustices when they are encountered. Not responding to our students’ unique needs around trauma and justice-involvement can perpetuate the inequality students have faced during their lifetimes and perpetuate social injustice. According to Fithian and Mitchell (2017), “Activist groups sometimes make the mistake ... [of thinking they] are inherently anti-oppressive purely because of [their] *intention* to do away with oppressive structures” (p. 2, emphasis added by the authors). Schools of social work that move beyond intention can work actively to institute the values upon which our profession is built. “As in all types of professional education, the risk is that social work students from more privileged educational backgrounds will continue to succeed in the professional trainings, while those from disadvantaged educational backgrounds will continue to succeed at lower rates, despite professional or academic potential” (Sayre & Sar, 2015, p. 627).

What is “Trauma-Informed?”

A trauma-informed approach is a framework which: 1) recognizes that trauma is pervasive in individuals, communities, and organizations; 2) recognizes that trauma causes long-term adverse effects; and 3) “seeks to resist re-traumatization” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014, p. 10). A trauma-informed approach is based on six guiding principles: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender considerations (SAMHSA, 2014). These principles are fundamental to *Trauma-Informed Interview Coaching* (TIIC) and are used to engage students in a collaborative process that encourages them to understand their histories in order to advocate for their own futures in social work.

During TIIC, faculty prepare students for field practicum interviews by helping them to talk about their histories from a strengths-based perspective and to find language to reframe their justice-involvement as meaningful lived experiences that can positively serve the organizations, individuals, and communities in which they will be working. This faculty support and preparation also serves to reduce the potential for the field interview process to be re-traumatizing, and helps students engage in Core Competency 1 - *Demonstrate Professional and Ethical Behavior* (Council on Social Work Education, 2015).

Trauma-Informed Interview Coaching (TIIC): The Process

Faculty first learn of students who have been justice system-impacted from self-reports on initial field forms. Field team members speak to students via individual welcome calls at least 120 days before their field start dates to address the issues indicated on the forms. Because conversations with justice-impacted students may be sensitive, the students' personal histories are discussed briefly and in a factual manner. Students are told, "Thank you for sharing that with me. I will look in your community and see how we might be able to secure a placement with this in mind."

In addition, students are offered to be introduced to faculty who provide TIIC and can provide guidance on the field interview process. If students are interested, they will be introduced to faculty coaches via email. The faculty coaches will respond and provide a choice of either a phone call or virtual meeting to provide TIIC. TIIC engages students in a parallel process whereby they receive trauma-informed support and direction while at the same time learning how to communicate their own experiences through a trauma-informed lens.

The following outline provides examples of how each of the six principles of trauma-informed care may be utilized in TIIC:

Safety

The faculty coaches ask students questions such as, "Do you feel safe talking about the felony? You do not have to disclose any details; however, we can co-create language you can use during your interview to talk about your carceral history."

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Faculty coaches strive to develop a trusting and transparent relationship with students that will serve as a template that students will take with them into the interview process. Faculty coaches prepare students for what they might expect during an interview and how to answer questions about their backgrounds. Students are encouraged to communicate during agency interviews that they would like to be transparent about information that will appear on background checks. Faculty coaches suggest that students initiate this topic of conversation after they have built rapport with the interviewer, perhaps towards the middle or end of the interview. Faculty coaches also help students find language to describe how their lived experiences have fueled their passion for social work.

Peer Support

An unexpected and exciting outcome of TIIC was that participating students wanted to build their own support community. This student-directed initiative led to the launch of a student interest group named *Unchained Scholars*. *Unchained Scholars* is currently comprised of 14 MSW and DSW students at the University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work who are committed to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline through advocating for change, building diverse communities, and challenging societal norms.

Collaboration and Mutuality

“[E]veryone has a role to play in a trauma-informed approach” (SAMHSA, 2014, p.11). As such, faculty coaches encourage students to embody this concept even as interviewees. This includes learning about the agency and being prepared with 3 to 4 questions in order to develop a solid understanding of the services, community, and culture they will encounter as an MSW student at the agency. This assists students in communicating the value they bring to the organization, articulating the skills they already possess, and identifying areas for growth and development. Students are taught how to utilize trauma-informed language in this endeavor. Students are encouraged to write a thank you note to the agency interviewer and to include something they learned during the interview.

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Faculty coaches encourage students to speak about their justice-involved histories by communicating that their lived experiences are strengths, and to do so in a way that is honest and avoids disclosing details that can be re-traumatizing. Maintaining boundaries that preserve and honor students' safety and personal integrity is paramount in an interview process that can leave students feeling exposed and vulnerable.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Under this guiding principle, organizations “actively move past cultural stereotypes and biases” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 11). This can be an opportunity for students to create dialogues during their agency interviews that address cultural, historical, and gender issues while communicating how the intersections of poverty, homelessness, racism, sexism, and other factors play a role in justice-involved histories - their own and those of participants served at the organization.

Future Considerations

Qualitative and quantitative data to determine the efficacy of TIIC is forthcoming. To date, 60 students have participated in TIIC. In the meantime, the fact that our justice-impacted MSW and DSW students are coming out of the “convict closet” - as one *Unchained Scholar* put it - to unite and advocate for equal opportunity and social justice, appears to vindicate the core concepts that TIIC seeks to achieve. In discussing his experiences as a justice-involved MSW student, Pryce (2019) writes about his work with *Unchained Scholars*, stating “Not only does it provide a safe space where I can feel unburdened by the weight of my past, it facilitates networking, understanding, and integration with a broader coalition of social work graduate students, allies, and professionals. *Unchained Scholars* are uniquely positioned to weave a tapestry of trauma into a banner of social justice. Our lived experience brings a level of authenticity, understanding, and empathy towards the marginalized populations we come in contact with that can't be learned from textbooks” (paragraph 6).

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