DEVELOPING TRAUMA-INFORMED HR PROTOCOLS FOR ARCHIVISTS EXPOSED TO DISTRESSING HISTORICAL CONTENT

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Abstract

Archivists employed with historical materials documenting violence, genocide, and becoming overly stressful, unique psychological challenges emerge through exposure to secondary trauma. However, human resource (HR) structures in archival institutions often fail to recognize the different emotional states connected to this work. Examples of this response include burnout, compassion fatigue, and lower job satisfaction. This article suggests initial thinking on developing trauma-informed HR protocols in the archival profession informed by interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, occupational health, and archival studies. The study shares results of a review of archival personnel duties, role expectations, and interviews with archival professionals to identify meaningful gaps in organizational support systems. Practical interventions proposed include: reflective supervision; flexible design of work; and embedded wellness resources. The proposed protocols aim to enhance resiliency, destigmatize feelings of emotional distress and cultivate healthy, sustainable work for archivists. The research is key to a greater understanding of mental health experience and contribution to the archive and related professions cultural, heritage sector. Lastly, archival institutions need policies be HR engagement processes focused on empathetic, contextualized engagement processes.

Keywords: trauma-informed care, human resources, archival labor, secondary trauma, occupational wellness, distressing content, mental health, archivists, burnout prevention, organizational support systems

INTRODUCTION

Archivists hold an important responsibility of being the custodians of historical memory. In many cases, the materials they work with document painful historical materials associated with war crimes, genocide, slavery, abuse, and forced migration. When considering how archivists approach emotional issues within their work, we note that the profession's focus on access and preservation has arguably overshadowed the effects of occupational strain associated with working with graphics of critically traumatic events. Frequent exposure, or rereading of highly vivid and shocking narratives and/or disturbing images can lead to secondary traumatic stress (STS), vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. While much is written and recorded about STS and trauma in social work and journalism professions, the associated emotional experiences of archival work have gone unrecognized, as archivists hold trauma-inducing records. Considering the continued expansion of the archives (potentially, in some cases by social justice records) we should acknowledge the reality that the emotional strain placed on archivists is likely to increase, as institutional awareness and supports have lagged behind when imagining archivists and institutional archival practice.Although the connection between trauma-exposed occupations and mental health has received extensive documentation, most archival institutions continue to operate without structured, formalized support systems for employee well-being[2][9]. Conventional human resources frameworks tend to focus on compliance, reporting, and productivity metrics, inadvertently sidelining the essential components of psychological resilience and emotional safety [1]. Conversely, trauma-informed human resources center empathy, psychological safety, and restorative practice; allowing an organization to reflect the base principles trauma informed practice is derived from such as , trust, and empowerment of individuals. Implementing trauma-informed practice in archives can desensitize feelings of emotional distress, lower chronic burnout and improve retention and staff engagement[5]. In addition, trauma-informed practices create more equitable workplaces, which are important for providing support when archivists from marginalized identities interact with records that reflect structural violence or intergenerational trauma, which can increase their precarity[12].This research intends to systematically explore the necessity and creation of trauma-informed human resource practices in archival institutions[4].Integrating evidence from mental health scholarship, trauma research,

and archival science, the investigation has three interdependent objectives: first, to delineate the psychological hazards intrinsic to archival work that involves distressing materials; second, to map the deficits in current institutional emotional support infrastructure; and third, to advance empirically grounded HR strategies that deliberately cultivate resilience and enhanced well-being among archival staff [8][10]. The paper therefore calls for a fundamental rethinking of how archives understand the well-being of their workers, arguing that the field must transition to a model of archival practice that prizes both dignity and long-term sustainability for the people who make the records possible[3].

II. Understanding Trauma Exposure

2.1 Definition of Trauma

Trauma describes all psychological, emotional, and physical reactions to scenarios where one's ability to cope has been overloaded. This response can come out of either a one-time traumatic incident or prolonged stressor the American Psychological Association defines trauma to include both. Added to this are the secondary or vicarious trauma that usually occurs in archival contexts due to prolonged indirect exposure to distressing materials, for example, graphic documents or images. Although it has been found that symptoms of secondary trauma replicate the symptoms of primary trauma, like anxiety, irritability, disrupted sleep, and fatigue; symptoms of secondary trauma is due to being in empathic relationship with another, not due to their experience[13]. Trauma is subjective and individual, thus people respond differently, revealing the rationale behind flexible and individual support systems in the workplace.

2.2 Effects of Trauma Exposure on Archivists

Although archivists are not trauma workers in the traditional sense, their work exposes them to material (such as victims' accounts of torture or exploitative images of abuse) that can exert trauma-related stress on them largely through vicarious exposure. This exposure can manifest as emotional fatigue, difficulty sleeping, anxiety, and moral distress, particularly when there is little or no institutional support in the face of such materials. The oftenrepetitive nature of such work can lead to burnout or compassion fatigue, which can be exacerbated by the professional isolation that they may experience. The lack of training for archivists in terms of recognizing or ameliorating the impact of their work means that archivists can shut down and internalize their suffering, which can lead them to feel guilt or self-doubt about the nature of and emotional responses to their work[14].

2.3 Common Sources of Distressing Historical Content

Some of the archival materials, such as documentation related to genocide, slavery, residential schools, or refugee experience type records, are more likely to be traumatic in nature. These records encapsulate the documentary histories of people, documenting accounts and sometimes imagery, but even summarizing and\or processing records places archivists on the stage during a type of trauma.This stress is likely to worsen when these records intersect with the archivist's personal memories or family histories of trauma, and if the archivists can only provide trauma-informed safety, the trauma-informed exposure to the records may have a bomb effect on some archivists, affecting their ability to positively engage with the work of archiving, regardless of their own trauma during or after the work because of it [11].

III. Developing Trauma-Informed HR Protocols

3.1 Training and Education on Trauma Awareness

One of the key components of trauma-informed HR practices is the implementation of education programs that raise consciousness around trauma and its effects in the archival community[15]. This training should include some knowledge of secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and burnout, as well as early warning signs in oneself and colleagues. Educating not just archivists, but also supervisors, HR personnel, and institutional leaders has methodological merit and encourages an established common language and shared cultural competency in relation to emotional states. Trauma education as part of ongoing professional development ensures the archivists are properly trained to work with emotional archival material, while also learning healthy coping behaviors, and establishing boundaries[6]. Staff can benefit from education programs on emotional regulation, reflective practice, psychological first-aid, and peer debriefing techniques, to provide the opportunity for employees to engage in their work in a safer manner. By including trauma literacy into archival education programs and new employee onboarding processes, it also normalizes discussions about mental health and trauma-informed approaches from the outset of someone's employment[7].

Table 1: Common Sources of Distressing Historical Content and Associated Psychological Risks for Archivists

Source Type	Example Archival Materials	Potential Psychological Impact
Genocide and War Crimes Archives	Survivor testimonies, photos of mass graves, court records	Vicarious trauma, grief, PTSD-like symptoms
Racial Violence and Slavery Records	Plantation ledgers, lynching images, segregation laws	Moral distress, anger, anxiety
Indigenous Assimilation Documentation	Residential school reports, death registries, letters	Intergenerational trauma trigger, despair
Gender-Based Violence and Abuse Files	Police statements, forensic images, victim affidavits	Compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion
Refugee and Migration Testimonies	Oral histories, asylum applications, deportation files	Survivor's guilt, helplessness

| Child Welfare and Institutional Abuse | Foster care records, institutional logbooks | Emotional dysregulation, intrusive memories |

Normal sources of traumatic content from archival repositories are presented in Table 1, along with potential psychosocial risk factors for archivists. It focuses specifically on the emotional aftermath of engaging with materials that can be related to genocide, racial violence, discrimination based on gender, and institutional trauma with options for trauma-informed policies about working in a workplace.

3.2 Implementation of Support Systems for Archivists

Institutions should provide strong and accessible support systems beyond training, to operationalize trauma-informed HR policies. Appropriate support structures should include multiple levels of support to address both individual and collective needs. Possible systems may include access to mental health services that are confidential, EAPs, regular wellness check-ins, and reflective supervision. Institutions may also decide to create affinity groups or peer support networks as safe ways for archivists to name the challenge they experience and share their ways of coping. Other types of support include flexible scheduling, distributing workload during times of emotional distress, and temporarily removing archivists from high-trauma collections. As acts of support, systems should be culturally relevant and attuned to recognizing that individuals live with trauma and engage in healing that is influenced by their social identities and histories. Transparency and trust are important; staff should have confidence that accessing support will not impede their professional progression or disadvantage them. By institutionalizing these supports, organizations convey their commitment to staff care as a practice rather than an add-on.

3.3 Creating a Safe and Supportive Work Environment

The larger workplace culture must encompass trauma-informed practices and values at all levels of organizational operation. A psychologically safe and supportive work environment requires intentionality to ensure that empathy, respect, and communication are all incorporated into the everyday functioning of the workplace. The design of physical space also matters, as they can be used creatively to create comfort or decompression, to the extent possible, such as having quiet rooms, resounding room or wellness corners when staff need to step away from potentially triggering materials. Supervisors and team leaders can and should demonstrate trauma-informed practices through checking in on the emotional state of staff; validating emotional responses to difficult materials; encouraging taking time off to tend to emotional and psychological needs; or simply asking how someone is doing. Current policies should document practice that recognizes emotional boundaries and prioritizes emotional safety, such as in relation to exposure limits to certain materials, rotating staff on higher intensity collections, or making participation in emotionally difficult projects and work voluntary. Also, trauma-informed leadership involves making space for professional autonomy, voice and choice for archivists and other staff on how they approach and conduct their work. Generative canter modeling, participatory decision-making and equity-centered governance all contribute to a workplace that is resilient, inclusive and centered around ethical care. While trauma-informed environments do not remove the emotional work in archival work, they certainly lessen potential harm and foster a culture of collective care and healing.

IV. Case Studies of Trauma-Informed HR Protocols

4.1 Example of Successful Implementation in a Historical Archives Institution

The National Center for Historical Memory (NCHM), a Latin American archiving institution working to archive the country's armed conflict, employed trauma-informed approaches in HR practices in response to staff burnout and vicarious trauma. Given the nature of their work with traumatic testimonies of violence, disappearances, and torture, the center decided to offer employee support through a multi-tiered approach. First, they created a requirement for trauma-awareness training to be offered to all employees, including, administrative and technical staff, to increase empathy and peer understanding. Second, they created a rotating peer debriefing model, for their staff to process difficult material, as a whole, in structured collaborative processing groups. Thirdly, the HR department collaborated with mental health professional providing monthly counseling and individual psychological assessments. In addition to these developments, archiving work on publications and the high-trauma of their content, have been offered flexible hours for flexible recovery scheduling. The combination of supports has seen a renewed sense of employee morale, and retention, greater institutional job satisfaction.

4.2 Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned

Although advances have been supported by institutions like the NCHM, trauma-informed HR practices have not occurred without difficulties. The first major obstacle is organizational resistance due to funding or lack of awareness regarding secondary trauma experienced by non-clinical professions. Leadership teams particularly questioned the need, equating emotional well-being with individual rather than institutional responsibility. The second difficulty was maintaining confidentiality and psychological safety for staff and their peers when using the service, as staff worried about supervisor perception or stigma. Even some of the logistics that support staff moving away from trauma exposed collections while completing their regular tasks went smoothly but were festinated. Several things can be learned from these challenges: (1) buy-in from the leadership is needed, and advocacy will accommodate requesting funds; advocacy will usually be required when establishing the desired evidence-based outcome; (2) training must be an ongoing process with staff input shaping its evolution; and (3) mental health services should be normalized into the institutional culture so interventions are not regarded as reactive to the trauma exposure.

4.3 Impact on Archivists' Well-Being and Job Performance

The implementation of trauma-informed HR practices at organizations like the NCHM provided both measurable and non-measurable benefits. Staff surveys showed a 40% decrease in self-reported burnout symptoms, and a 30% perceived increase in institutional support. Because archivists reported feeling more emotionally centered when grappling with difficult collections and feeling more comfortable bringing up their mental health needs with supervisors, productivity at the NCHM also stayed the same or improved, likely because archivists felt more satisfied with their job (and missed less work).Most importantly, a supportive environment fostered trust and bonding between team members, which strengthened a culture of care and shared responsibility. Qualitative interviews signified archivists felt more respected and valued, and therefore became more committed to the mission of the institution, and reported a deeper sense of purpose connected with the work they were doing. These effects suggest the value of trauma-informed HR policies is significant, in terms of individual agency and wellbeing but also potential to strengthen organizational resilience and ethical stewardship of historical records for the public good.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 Areas for Further Study on Trauma Exposure in Archivists

Even if secondary trauma is becoming more recognized and more timely in being acknowledged as part of archival work, the amount of empirical scholarship documenting its presence and long-term impact on professionals is still thin. While it is interesting to read about the experiences of archivists or commentaries from a profession, scholars and investigating collecting advocates can also utilize a mixed-methods approach that considers qualitative interviews along with quantitative psychometric measures of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout is warranted. Longitudinal research is a valuable method to examine how archivists process and respond to time or to examine how specific identity characteristics, including race, gender and culture, impact risk and vulnerability to secondary trauma. Comparing trauma-intensive collections to general collections, and investigating the risk factors and voids that existed in the management and coping of emotionally-stimulating collections would illustrate levels of risk and the way in which the risk was being handled. Researching and documenting the impact of trauma-related concerns on decisions about appraisal, access, and description, specifically related to records with traumatic histories, will illuminate the nature of archivists' ethical obligations in archival work.

5.2 Strategies for Improving Trauma-Informed HR Protocols

To achieve predictability and reliability, trauma-informed HR practices should not be merely a collection of if-and-when to-do lists, but they need to transition into institutional policy. Bringing in archivists, therapists, and other stakeholders opens avenues for protocols to be culturally informative. Example institutional practices would include: professional development and training on trauma responses; peer support models meant to be socially safe; reporting channels that are meant to be operationally safe; and alterations to workloads where possible. Trauma-informed HR practices in organizations should be guided by the national archival organizations, defining standards and benchmarks for organizations to use the assess where they are in their own practices and if any revisions are needed.

5.3 Potential Benefits for the Archival Profession and the Preservation of Historical Content

Trauma-informed HR policies benefit the archivist, but also the sector. When archivists feel supported, their well-being, retention, and productivity increases. Safe workspaces support the practice of ethics and the respectful and diverse handling of sensitive materials, reducing emotions of paralysis and biases. Supporting diverse faces, especially from marginalized and trauma-impacted communities, widens perspectives in the archives. Working from social justice frameworks and initiatives, trauma-informed models will support the public trust and ethical standing of the organization, enhancing sustainability for organizations.

CONCLUSION

This study has underscored the pressing necessity for trauma-informed human resources policies in archival settings, especially for staff repeatedly encountering disturbing historical materials. Among the principal discoveries are the emergence of psychological dangers, including secondary traumatic stress and severe burnout, the absence of supportive institutional frameworks, and the documented success of specific measures such as trauma-focused training, collegial support networks, and adjustable work hours. Illustrative cases such as the work of the National Center for Historical Memory reveal both the hurdles and the benefits of embedding holistic, trauma-informed systems, thus lending empirical credibility to the recommended measures. Mental well-being for archivists cannot remain an ancillary issue; it is a foundational necessity for ethical and durable archival stewardship. Archivists hold the heaviest memories of our society. Supplying the support needed for archivists to do their work, from their hearts, as well as, accurately and with lasting strength. Due to the emotional labour involved in the profession, acknowledgment of acknowledgment is fundamental to changing an institutional culture to caring, equitable, and well-being. Consequently, the archivists' psychological well-being serves to ensure sustainability in their own work and preserve the authentic documentation of history. It is now time for archival institutions to confront the task of transforming theoretical acknowledgement into systematic, meaningful change. When planning the integration of trauma-informed principles into archival workplaces, leaders, human resource personnel and funding bodies must include all aspects of the organization's life, which include hiring and

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onboarding, supervision, and professional development. Enacting trauma-informed human resource practices should be considered a conscious practice of investing in employee well-being, the longevity of organizations, and the moral care of archival materials. Once these practices are normalized within the archival profession, it publicly affirms a commitment to justice and represents this commitment with respect to both the records it preserves and the dignity of employees who look after those records.

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