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Madison P. Pimental

In this article, I argue that higher education inflicts trauma on Black and Indigenous students. However, trauma-informed practices can serve as a liberatory practice that disrupts white supremacy culture and minimize harm against BIPOC students. I define trauma and trauma-informed practices (TIPs) and weave how racial trauma, including political, generational, and necrophiliac trauma, impacts Black and Indigenous students in university contexts. In the spirit of hope and resistance, I end with suggestions for student affairs practitioners outlined by the framework of TIP tenets that they can directly implement in their conversations and mentorship of college students. I also suggest strategies for the systemic change needed to prevent higher education from doing more harm.

Keywords: trauma, trauma-informed, higher education, student affairs, necropolitics, BIPOC students

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Trauma impacts us all – either directly or indirectly through our relationships. The entire world endured (and is still enduring) trauma due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In a study of approximately 2,000 college students, more than half of all students surveyed said they experienced a stressful life event (Smyth et al., 2010). While the study is over 10 years old at time of writing this, one could argue that the COVID-19 pandemic may have worsened these numbers. A study completed 2 years after the onset of the pandemic indicated academic burnout and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder had similar symptoms (Tomaszek, 2022). Additionally, 5.2 million children lost a parent or guardian during a 20-month period during the pandemic (Unwin et al., 2022). Correspondingly, 2020 was also a year where Black trauma was broadcasted live and in color. Social media outlets such as Twitter gave access to activism efforts in a time where people needed to stay home (Williams, 2021, Anderson, 2022). Yet, recent research shows that consumption of videos of traumatic Black experiences signify correlations with depressive symptoms (Diaz et al., 2022, Williams, 2021).

Higher education also serves as a traumatizing system for historically marginalized students. From its origins, United States higher education existed to serve primarily white, cis, straight, and (at least) temporarily able-bodied students (Edgerton, 2001). As an institution serving this specific population, it actively excludes and harms historically marginalized students. This topic proves more important than ever as student affairs practitioners begin to heal students during an ongoing international pandemic, racial trauma in the Summer of 2020 and onwards, and ongoing and traumatic systemic oppression inside higher education.

Purpose

Higher education as an institution serves as a trauma enacting system for Black and Indigenous students - but student affairs practitioners can utilize TIPs for healing and resistance against these oppressive hegemonic systems. I define trauma and trauma-informed practices (TIPs) and weave how racial trauma, including political, generational, and necrophiliac trauma, impacts Black and Indigenous students at the University. In the spirit of hope and resistance, I end with suggestions for student affairs practitioners outlined by the framework of TIP tenets that they can directly implement in their conversations and mentorship of college students, as well as systemic change needed to prevent higher education from doing more harm. I write to student affairs professionals broadly, but more specifically want to call to action white identifying professionals who participate in the traumatizing system of higher education. I ask these professionals to reflect on how they enable or disrupt traumatizing Black and indigenous students of color and to expand their understandings of trauma-informed practices.
**Literature Review**

Experiencing racism in the academy is trauma – the structures of higher education violate and traumatize Black and Indigenous students through traumatic histories (generational trauma) and racist practices. As previously defined, trauma is hard to define. Yet, as seen in the literature regarding trauma and college students, trauma is pervasive in their identities (Shalka, 2019). This literature review aims to define different types of racial trauma at the university, including postmemory, (Shalka, 2022), necropolitics (Squire et al., 2020), and interpersonal racism. I then discuss the effects of trauma on Black and Indigenous students, which frames why trauma must be discussed in higher education.

**Gaps in Existing Literature**

Before explaining the different types of racial trauma in higher education, I want to remain transparent and share that discussions about trauma in higher education and student affairs are restricted by recency. TIP began as a healthcare and mental health practice for healthcare clinicians, social workers, mental health professionals, etc. It then moved to K-12 education, where it gained traction in fields of student conduct and guidance counseling. As it exists now, the literature for trauma-informed practices is just now making waves in the field of higher education. Through searching the literature, I have found the earliest mentions of TIP in education begin around 2018. Earlier articles than 2018 typically focus on trauma-informed pedagogies in an academic setting, such as the classroom (Carello and Butler, 2014).

**Trauma from Interpersonal Racism**

When focusing racial trauma, interpersonal racism may come to the forefront of the helping professional’s mind. It may be easy to connect trauma to interpersonal racism – when a student calls another a racial slur, the connection to trauma is easy to make. Additionally, the last 10 years in the United States have shown a growing “alt-right” and conservative fascist power, which only continues to rise and affect Black and Indigenous students (Williams, 2021). After the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the number of reported hate crimes motivated by race increased significantly (Hernández & Harris, 2022).

Yet, I also include microaggressions in my definitions of interpersonal racial trauma. Racial microaggressions are pervasive yet subtle – they include verbal stereotyping, put-downs, or even non-verbal glares, avoidance, and fear of people of color (Sue & Constantine, 2007). Students of color take away the message that they are undervalued, undeserving of respect, and overlooked because of their race after repeated microaggressions (Sue & Constantine, 2007). As previously mentioned, the link between interpersonal racism and trauma in higher education is under-researched. Yet, I argue that these repeated microaggressions are traumatic for Black and Indigenous students. Studies outside of higher education show that racial trauma victims, including microaggressions, may experience
symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Williams & Printz, 2018). Williams and Printz share that all types of racial discrimination, including microaggressions, are detrimental and traumatic. Other studies show that more covert and slight interpersonal racist interactions are even more traumatic for people of color (Jones et al., 2016). Correspondingly, I argue that Black and Indigenous students fall under this umbrella – their student identities may further complicate their traumatic responses but repeated racial microaggressions serve as trauma for Black and Indigenous students.

(Necro)Politics of Trauma and Postmemories

Necropolitics shows higher education’s real, lasting harm as a traumatizing system – especially with generational trauma. Mbembe defines necropolitics as defining who matters and who does not – who do we kill and give life (Mbembe, 2003)? Generational trauma can be defined as trauma carried from generation to generation of families – for example, a Black student where generations in the past have been enslaved or Indigenous students whose ancestral histories have been erased by genocide. Generational trauma acknowledges the immense trauma of the past is not only historical, but rather consistently rehashed and made anew (Shalka, 2022). Both Necropolitics and generational trauma speak to each other – necropolitics determines whose generational trauma we center and decenter. Generational trauma often stems from necropolitical death-making. Below, I share various examples of generational trauma and necropolitics and their place at the university.

Plantation politics, as described by Squire et al., (2020) underscore how echoes of American plantation society ripple through higher education as postmemories described by Shalka (2022). By understanding the university as a neoplantation, and plantations as a source of generational and historical trauma, we also understand that higher education engages in traumatizing students. For example, Squire explains how in plantation politics, white masters expressed supremacy through paternalism and control – in higher education, Universities express paternalism through overregulation of affinity groups for marginalized students, increased bureaucracy, and extensive restrictive policing (Squire et al., 2020). Additionally, plantation politics invoke ranking to enforce this binary of master/slave, while the University places emphasizes the rank of faculty (associate, assistant, tenured), students (honors, remedial, at risk) and staff (presidents, trustees, deans, provosts, etc.). Not only are these ranking inaccessible in understanding the power dynamics of organizations, but it also evokes strict understandings of which persons on campus have what power (Squire et al., 2020).

Postmemories may also haunt Black and Indigenous students – postmemories meaning the entanglement of temporal trauma, and specific historical events that may haunt people of marginalized identities (Shalka, 2022). For the students who are children of generations of American chattel slavery, structure of higher education can inflict this postmemory Shalka (2022) describes. I also argue that settler colonialism at the University inflicts postmemories of Indigenous genocide, a traumatic historical event (Nash, 2019). Like plantation politics, settler colonialism permeates every facet of the
University in efforts to erase and/or displace Indigenous peoples (Steinman, 2018). The site of a university inflicts postmemory, especially when (not if) the university resides on Indigenous land or identifies itself as a “land-grant” institution (Nash, 2019). Every university resides on stolen Indigenous land from settler colonialism and genocide. Since settler colonialism is an ongoing process, trauma for Indigenous students exists outside this postmemory of genocide. Mascots and other visuals of Indigenous students on campus creates harmful stereotyping – a microaggression that leaves an imprint on a student (Steinman, 2018).

Understanding these necropolitics and postmemories helps student affairs practitioners see concrete examples of trauma at the institution. Not only does historical and generational trauma factor into how the University traumatizes students, but current practice through these oppressive systems continue to traumatize and evoke memories of historical trauma to Black and Indigenous students. These postmemories of white supremacy, slavery, and genocide are the groundwork for how universities continue to traumatize students. By understanding this groundwork, student affairs professionals may begin to see how the environment and structures of higher education affect their students, which they can then use to inform their counseling and advising of college students.

**Understanding Trauma and Trauma-Informed Practice**

To begin to look at TIP, I must explain the definition and impact of trauma. While no absolute definitions exist for trauma, The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides some guidelines. SAMHSA defines trauma as an “event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced” experienced by an individual as harmful and have “lasting adverse effects” on their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being (SAMHSA, 2014). Social workers, mental health clinicians, and educators often refer to SAMHSA’s definition of trauma and TIPs to inform their practice on counseling students. SAMHSA further defines trauma’s three “E’s” as events, experience, and effects. I want to stress that all of these “e’s” are interwoven. Not all “traumatic events” are traumatic; one person’s experience of an event may have different effects than another’s experience. For example, when a group of siblings are removed from an abusive home, every sibling will carry a different experience with them that bears different effects, not all traumatic. Trauma also encompasses “Adverse Childhood Experiences,” or ACEs. ACEs can lead to long-lasting effects into adulthood, where triggers from these experiences can harm students’ prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain that helps with executive decision-making (Hunter, 2022).

SAMHSA presents key assumptions and functions of TIP that I use as my baseline for its applications in higher education. SAMHSA explains the four “r’s” of trauma like the three e’s – realization, recognition, response, and resisting re-traumatization (SAMHSA, 2014). These four functions do not necessarily work in a numbered system, but rather, TIP requires the practitioner to continuously realize, respond, recognize, and resist trauma simultaneously. Realization means the
practitioner understands trauma and its impact on individuals and systems. Recognition asks the practitioner to notice signs of trauma with the individuals they serve. Recognition also requires the practitioner to develop cultural awareness, as signs and symptoms of trauma may show up differently across gender, class, race, settings, etc. Response includes responding to individuals with the TIP approach and structuring organizations and institutions to be trauma-informed. When looking at higher educational systems such as university organization of staff and faculty, mirroring policy and practice to be trauma-informed can help practitioners better aid their students. I explain more of this concept when I explain how higher education can traumatize students. Practitioners using these R’s must also incorporate the basics tenets of TIP: safety, trust and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment (voice & choice), and cultural competency (SAMHSA, 2014). All these components mean different things to different clients and students and cannot be performed uniformly across groups (organizationally or demographically).

In this paper, I focus on colleges and universities that award 2- or 4-year degrees. I specifically look at liberal arts colleges, PWI colleges and universities, and other non-minority-serving institutions. Universities that are minority-serving can still act as traumatizing systems, but the violence that occurs in institutions of higher education that are predominately white is vastly systemic. I also follow the assumption that chronically experiencing oppression is a traumatic event. Based on SAMHSA's definition, trauma from identity is pervasive, nonsingular, and can affect a person for a lifetime. By following these assumptions, I explain how universities act as a traumatizing system and elaborate how trauma-informed practices can help liberate traumatized students. I briefly explain necro and plantation politics to emphasize further the generational trauma universities create and reinforce.

Effects of Trauma

Trauma evokes more than just an “upset” feeling - understanding trauma’s effects on college students emphasize the importance of trauma-informed practice. Trauma can impact the body’s responses to stimuli, a person’s understanding of safety, and a college student’s development (Shalka, 2022). By understanding these effects, we understand the rising pressure to heal college students, particularly, Black and Indigenous students.

Effects from racism, including hate crimes, continuous systemic oppression because of white supremacy, consistent microaggressions, etc., are similar – if not the same – effects as trauma (Hernández & Harris, 2022). Since the conception of America, Native peoples of America have been murdered through state genocide – physically, culturally, and spiritually (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Echoes of the United States’ chattel slavery systems lurk in the American conscious, institutions such as the prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2010), and arguably higher education (Squire et al., 2020). Students are not the only ones affected either – BIPOC faculty and staff must endure vicarious or secondary trauma as they are forced to educate their white peers and serve as mentors for BIPOC
students (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019). Physically, trauma can rewire the brain, so the body may respond in involuntary ways to stimuli and triggers (SAMHSA, 2014). Trauma also affects behaviors, as the mind and body attempt to comprehend complex triggers and keep themselves safe (Mundell, 2022).

Racial trauma can impact how students show up in the classroom, on campus, and post-graduation (Shalka, 2022). Cognitively, when students experience trauma, they gain an understanding of how their peers see them and how they see their peers (Hernández & Harris, 2022). When a BIPOC student experiences a racial microaggression in class, that experience lives within them both physically and emotionally. They become less eager to speak up and participate, knowing how their peers and even faculty may perceive them, and transform the microaggression into an expression of their identity. Additionally, trauma can isolate students (Shalka, 2019). Racial segregation at PWIs already create isolation for students of color – racial trauma only digs this gap further into a Black/Indigenous student’s identity and cognitive development. Given the effects of trauma, I argue this clearly shows a mental health crisis within college students – specifically, Black and Indigenous college students.

**Positionality**

My professional and academic interests in trauma and TIPs spawn from my time as a live-in AmeriCorps member at a shelter for pregnant mothers experiencing homelessness in the Phoenix area. From this experience, I carry the stories of resilient women and aim to share the value of trauma-informed practices. I exist in a liminal place in the academy as a racially ambiguous person. My family are immigrants from the Azorean islands of Portugal. I am a white, queer woman who carries a first-gen identity (neither of my parents attended college). I write this article, which focuses on racial trauma, from a place where I experience bias from my skin tone, but also experience privilege in my white, racial identity. I study this from a perspective as someone who does not experience racial or systematic trauma from the University, but other forms of oppression and other adverse traumatic experiences that affect my lens as a student affairs practitioner.

**Implications – TIPs as Resistance and Liberation**

Discussions of trauma, especially regarding racial trauma, exhausts students and their mentors – so the question remains, how can student affairs practitioners practice TIPs with their students and larger systems? Student affairs practitioners now begin to detail the framework of their trauma-informed practices in higher education. In the literature specific to TIPs in higher education, many such as Mundell (2022), Hunter (2022), Shalka (2022) list specific examples in employing change. By using the tenets outlined by SAMHSA (2014), student affairs professionals can employ specific practices when counseling students. I list two different tenets of TIP that student affairs practitioners can implement in their practice, as well as disrupting traumatic oppressive systems for Black and Indigenous students.
Safety

In the world of trauma-informed practice, “clients,” or in this case, students, define what safety means to them. Safety at its core means physical safety (Haines, 2019). Yet, this definition does not do much for victims of post-traumatic stress. As humans, we can exist in a physically safe place and time without feeling “safe.” In higher education, “safety” often conflates to withdrawal and passivity. When classrooms or offices state they create “safe spaces,” they often mean that this space is not the space to ask big questions, challenge thought, or get uncomfortable. When I use the word safety, I stick with Haines’ definition of understanding one’s environment “openly” and “relaxed,” rather than how trauma wires humans to feel anxious, heightened, and scared (2019).

I look to the Seeking Safety model – an evidence-based practice workbook for those looking for recovery from PTSD and substance use (Treatment Innovations, 2020). Seeking Safety consists of 25 topics on rebuilding safety and developing “safe” coping strategies that can shift their cognitive thinking, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships. In my AmeriCorps role, we used the Seeking Safety model when mentoring the women we worked with. I argue that this model of safety can easily apply to student affairs work. If student affairs practitioners use Seeking Safety when mentoring undergraduate students, regardless of if they know if the student struggles with trauma or substance use, practitioners begin to introduce trauma-informed practice into their counseling.

Additionally, establishing safety disrupts racial oppression in higher education by asking students, particularly Black and Indigenous students who undergo racial trauma, how they feel relaxed and open to thriving within the academy (Haines, 2019). Hernández and Harris (2022) describe how cultural centers help Black and Indigenous students find safe community, which can result in disruptions of white supremacy. Cultural centers, or, identity-based centers create space for students to engage in dialogue or just being with peers of a shared identity. Black cultural centers, as described by Patton, create a “home away from home” or even a “safe haven” (Patton, 2010). Native American identity centers are often “sanctuaries” for Indigenous students (Shotton et al., 2010). These cultural centers create physical homes and sanctuaries for Black and Indigenous centers and create engaging events, destigmatizing programming, training for white-identifying students, faculty and staff, and mentor relationships for students of color. Developing meaningful relationships with mentors aids a student’s sense of safety – especially when they can define these relationships themselves.

Trust and Transparency

When thinking about the tenets of “trust” and “transparency”, student affairs professionals not only have to build relationships for students to trust them, but also for them to trust their students. Mundell (2022) describes this as “seeing past behavior,” but I see it more than that. Establishing trust through relationship building and creating transparency disrupts power imbalances set by white
supremacy culture (Okum, 2016). White supremacy culture asks white professionals to employ power by red taping access to knowledge, hiding behind obscure policies, and redirecting students through labyrinths of institutional knowledge. By creating transparency in our policies, and procedures, staff can begin to disrupt the traumatizing structure of higher education.

For example, in student conduct, policies regarding alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and other drugs, public safety, and codes of conduct can create irreparable harm and trauma for students – particularly Black and Indigenous students (Taylor et al., 2022). Policies muddled in legalistic verbiage and jargon can prevent students from fully understanding them. When universities expect students to follow this code, but their students cannot understand it or its processes, they are not transparent and can trigger trauma responses in their students. Conduct processes that replicate courtroom procedures may also traumatize students through their lack of transparency, drawn-out procedures, and inherent mistrust in students’ abilities.

University administrators can shift this narrative and become more proactive in preventing trauma by making their policies and procedures easier to understand. Administrators can use language separate from the carceral legal system and simplify policies and procedures to create transparency in their policies. Additionally, administrators can outline procedures in a matter that’s easy to find and to understand. What would a conduct process look like if conduct facilitators met with students and developed relationships within the community before students step into the conduct office? What if the ones “policing” the university became more involved on campus, establishing trust between admin and the students they “police.” This goes beyond conduct policies and procedures – these strategies can apply to housing contracts, faculty syllabuses, and other convoluted university procedures.

**TIPs as Liberatory System Change**

Despite the heavy and often violent connotations trauma carries in every piece of literature surrounding TIPs in student affairs, the tone reads as hopeful (Shalka, 2022, Hunter, 2022). Practitioners who write about trauma in higher education often end in suggesting solutions through the lens of TIPs. While TIPs work well when counseling students directly, it also gives us a new lens of trauma to utilize when enacting and fighting for systemic change. In a conversation between Wilson Okello and Tricia Shalka, they ask questions on this type of systemic change, and what it might specifically look like at the University (2022). Questions arise of how to show up in conversation as vulnerable, how to protect students from the harm universities can create, and how universities can prevent that harm in the first place. Hunter (2022) calls this ideal university as a “trauma-sensitive” university, emphasizing that all students need to feel safe to thrive (an idea I explore later in my implications). Mundell gives specific lessons and asks their reader to allow themselves to make mistakes (2022). Self-reflective TIPs are also crucial as student affairs practitioners must practice.
trauma-informed self-talk so they may also heal. As employees of the University, we must also show kindness to ourselves so that we may heal.

**Conclusion**

I recognize I spent the better part of this piece elaborating on racial trauma and its effects on Black and Indigenous students. Interpersonal and generational trauma deeply impact Black and Indigenous students’ sense of well-being on campus. Yet, trauma-informed practices not only aids in interpersonal relationships between student affair professionals and students, but also can create liberatory change and healing at the university. By looking through evidence-based practices such as Seeking Safety, or SAMHSA guidelines of trauma-informed care, student affairs can begin to reduce the harm and trauma of higher education. To be clear, the goal of this piece is not for white student affairs professionals to heal or “save” Black and Indigenous students. I hope to help equip all student affairs professionals to understand trauma-informed practices and utilize it for change. As outlined above, TIPs are inherently anti-racist and can be used for liberatory change.

I believe in higher education. I believe that higher education can become a safe system that empowers its students to achieve and thrive, in whatever way they wish to define it. COVID-19 is the not the only mass trauma higher education will endure. Higher education will continue to traumatize students if its structures remain the same. Looking at the body of literature that proves this to be true is exhausting. The burden of uplifting and changing these structures often land on the bodies of Black and Indigenous students, faculty, and staff. Yet, I resist the temptation to do nothing. I aim to heal myself from my experiences in the University and hope to help heal students through resisting trauma enacting systems and practicing TIPs on myself, my students, and the university.
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