

Organization Development Review

JOURNAL OF THE ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

ISSN 2640-0650

Organizational Trauma, Working with Narcissism, and OD with Metaphors in China

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Organization Development Review

Published quarterly
Copyright 2023
Organization Development Network, Inc.
ISSN 2640-0650

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Organizational Trauma, Working with Narcissism, and OD with Metaphors in China

As the year approaches its end, we at *OD Review* welcome the close of 2023 and hope for a pleasant holiday season for all. Our best wishes go out to all, hopeful for a better 2024 that is less violence, and more peaceful, healthy, prosperous, and more filled with personal growth and effective organizations.

It has been a productive year, and the crew at *OD Review* have engaged in a considerable number of improvement projects for our journal. First, you have likely read or heard about the work we have been doing to implement our new *OD Review* submission platform. Although considerable progress has been made, there are still a few technical aspects that need to be reconciled before the official change-over and launch. This project will greatly improve our manuscript review processes, allowing for real-time monitoring, immediate indexing of new articles, indexing and maintenance of older articles, and the recording of all valuable statistics related to our journal.

Next, we have two special issues being solicited and planned for 2024.

Dr. Lisa Meyer, Associate Editor will serve as the editor for our September issue entitled *Kurt Lewin's Legacy in*

OD: Deepening the Roots and Growing the Branches. The December issue, entitled *Beyond DEIB: Bridging to an Equity-Centered Future*, will be co-edited by **Drs. John Bennett and Yabome Gilpin-Jackson**. The Calls for each of these can be found in this issue and on our journal website.

We have had many conversations related to our section called *Practicing OD*. I greatly appreciated the continuous and rigorous editing work that our co-editors of *Practicing OD*, **Stacey Heath, Deb Peters, and Rosalind Spiegel** managed for many years. I'm pleased to let you know that we have a new small group of interested editors who have joined our team (**Paul Taylor-Pitt, Patrick Duffy, Lauren Catenacci, and Kyle Payne**) and are working on some new ways to design, develop, and promote this new version of the section. *Practicing OD* will remain similar to the previous scope, being focused on our practice through the publication of relatively short articles, but with criteria and processes that create new and innovative ways for readers to engage and interact with the authors. Stand by for more of the exciting recreation of this resource.

We are very pleased that **Drs. Preston Lindsay and Colin Cooper** shared their knowledge and interest in an interesting, time-sensitive, and profound topic of Organizational Trauma and created a special Call to solicit current thinking about this important issue. They edited the selected articles with authors and created a **Special Section on Organizational Trauma** for the current

issue, occupying the majority of this issue's content. Please see their introduction and overview of the section following (page 8).

The Problem of Consulting for Organizations Led by Narcissists by **John Conbere, Alla Heorhiadi, David Swenson** tackles the issue of dealing with narcissistic leaders. Another cause for organization traumas and an issue in leadership for a long time. They discuss narcissism and how it impacts the organization, followed by some ways to deal with it as an internal or external consultant.

Jane Feng contributes more information on her years of work in OD in China with *Practicing OD in China by Engaging Metaphors for Change*. She explains how important metaphors are in China, their relationship with change, and their use in consulting and coaching. Her metaphor-based interventions can also help OD practitioners working in other cultures.

As the current Editor of the journal, I remain open to innovative thinking, ideas, and recommendations from our audience. Feel free to contact me with any ideas you may have (editor@odnetwork.org). We have a wide field that seems to regularly find new ways to help human systems operate better, and places for people to thrive. We welcome all that helps to advance our field and how we serve organizations, communities, and people!

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Call for Articles: OD Review Special Issue (Fall 2024)

Kurt Lewin's Legacy in OD

Deepening the Roots and Growing the Branches

*"Legacy. What is a legacy?
It's planting seeds in a garden
you never get to see."*

—from *Hamilton*,
An American Musical

"Few people have had as profound an impact on the theory and practice of social and organizational psychology as Kurt Lewin" (Schein, 1995). The far-reaching influence of Kurt Lewin in organization science has been compared to that of Einstein's on physics, or Freud's on psychiatry. Yet, unless someone is a student of psychology or organization development, there is a chance they are unfamiliar with the outsized influence of Kurt Lewin on contemporary society.

During his lifetime, Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) broke from the traditions of most social scientists of his time and his aspirations took him far beyond the narrow interests of his scientific community. Yet his work was sometimes 'dumbed down' into simplistic models in management textbooks or altogether missing from historical accounts of management (Billig, 2014; Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, & Rowlinson, 2017). Following his untimely death, the impact of Lewin's work in the social sciences faded, leading some scholars from the past to presume that his achievements lacked relevance or failed to meet the standards of academic rigor.

Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in Lewin's work among scholars working in many disciplines in the social sciences (Burnes, 2017). They are rediscovering and

reexamining Lewin's past work and are fascinated by its relevance to their work in change and resolving social conflict today.

Building upon this rediscovery, the *OD Review* is planning a special issue with the aim of deepening the roots and extending the branches of Kurt Lewin's legacy in OD. The editors invite innovative OD scholar practitioners to share new interpretations of Kurt Lewin's influence on contemporary OD through submissions that relate to Lewin's passion for integrating the social sciences and his focus on resolving social conflict. We especially encourage submissions from authors who answer yes to the following questions.

- » When facing a significant challenge, are you the kind of person who questions conventional thinking?
- » Do you immerse yourself in complex situations, believing that increased understanding will lead to a better way to think about a problem?
- » Do you view change as a participative, learning process?
- » Do you seek to resolve conflict by combining multiple perspectives and driving for "both/and" solutions?
- » Are you concerned with the effects of oppressive modes of management or government?
- » Are you a systems thinker who integrates social science theory into resolving significant social problems?

This special issue is scheduled for publication in September 2024. Interested authors are invited to submit a brief abstract or proposal for feedback through **February 28, 2024**. The deadline for submitting completed articles is **May 1, 2024**. Proposals may be submitted via email to Associate Editor Lisa Meyer at lisameyer@att.net. Authors will be expected to follow the General Guidelines for *OD Review*, <https://www.odnetwork.org/page/odreview#odr-submissions>.

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Lisa Meyer
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Beyond DEIB

Bridging to an Equity-Centered Future

*The time for the healing of the wounds has come.
The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has
come. The time to build is upon us.*

—Nelson Mandela

This special journal issue calls on Organization Development (OD) scholars and practitioners to accelerate our efforts in bridging to an equity-centered future by expanding our inquiries. Amid a world in multiple global crises and transitions, many issues are polarizing and dividing us. In the news, the dinner conversations, the community chatter, social media—the stories of versus dominates. In the versus debates, we are pitted against each other, exist in online and offline echo chambers, and divulge into positional, tribal lines, each looking and speaking about the other with extreme distrust at best and violent rhetoric at worst. Paradoxically, Diversity, Equity Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) efforts and all its analogous acronyms related to anti-racism and anti-oppression are central to many current debates. Despite growing evidence about our dangerously unequal world, legislative debates, actions to roll back equity, and efforts to hold back civil and human rights advances for systemically marginalized groups globally have increased. We are swimming amid polarities like:

*Right vs. Left
Black vs. White
Boss vs. Employees
Religion vs. Religion
Immigrant vs. National
Conservative vs. Liberal
Nationalist vs. Regional/Global Alliances
Misinformation/Disinformation vs. Truth
Cancel Culture vs. Anti-woke Concerns
Climate Action vs. Climate Change Skepticism
Counter Terrorism vs. National/Border Security*

What does it look like when we change the *versus* to *and*? What becomes possible when we:

- » Engage in dialogue vs. debate?

- » Accept each other's positions and identities without forcing our positions and identities on others?
- » Seek to understand rather than correct/fix others?
- » Trade the anxieties we each hold in the place of trying to control others for faith in our shared humanity?
- » Replace the arrogance of trying to teach others our way with openness to learn from others' experiences.
- » Are critical of our social and global systems that center power and dominance in some and ascribe marginality to others without levying personal attacks?
- » Center humanity in place of political rhetoric to find solutions?
- » See organizations and institutions as sites for human flourishing rather than gatekeepers of power and privilege?
- » Commit collectively to building a future that works for the betterment of all.

In the place of *and*, there is an emerging future that we, humanity, must engage in to achieve an equity-centered reality. We, humanity, and the organizations and social systems we have designed are at the center of the various global crises we face, and solving any of the challenges of our era starts with addressing the inequities in our world that are at the roots of the problems we face. Expanding their thinking to our global community, we join Adrienne Maree Brown in saying, "We will not cancel us." The stakes of our human and planetary existence are too high. We must build our bridges.

We believe Organization Development scholars and practitioners must hold the tension between the past, present, and future and determine how we must cross the threshold of these divides together. OD has never been values-neutral and has always used human-centered, democratic values to collaborate in finding solutions; this is the challenge of our times! We are navigating into an unknown future with grey

cont'd.

zones of change, questioning leadership, norms of the past, and how to survive and thrive in a decolonized future. Organization Development has seen some of these disruptions and changes many times before. We helped in early civil rights endeavors; Lewin began early versions of OD in work in racial conflict situations. We've had major economic jolts and recoveries before. We've seen incredible technological transformations shift how we do nearly everything. And OD has been involved!

So, in our conceptual backpack, methodological toolkits, and behavioral science roots, we have ways to help in any situation. We may not have answers, but that was never our flag! We understand the socio-technical world we live and work in and how humans need to relate, collaborate, connect, and make meaning to align to a shared purpose and well-being for organized systems to succeed. Our work has the potential to impact individuals, teams, organizations, communities, and the world as we inquire into new critical questions to bridge our divides and work towards an equity-centered future.

In this special issue, we invite you to explore and present your research, thinking, practice, case studies, and responses to the questions/topics below to explore how we can bridge to an equity-centered future critically and appreciatively.

Ideal submissions will address paradoxes, bridge tensions across and within worldviews, and advance new ways of thinking, being, acting, and our overall human organizing to grow our capacity for dialectical and complex thought, deliberation, and knowing.

We are asking: *In terms of DEIB work: What is working? What is not working? Where to from here?*

1. How should OD respond to various court and legislative actions that appear to be taking steps backward?
2. How can OD respond to the “woke” label?
3. How can OD respond to cancel culture?
4. How can the “container” for DEIB work be systematically created and maintained?
5. How are values and political beliefs operating paradoxically in terms of DEIB?
6. Is DEIB apolitical? Should it be?
7. How can dialogue and deliberation be applied in a polarized world to bridge divides?
8. What is the place of DEIB in the scholarship and practice of OD?
9. What is the return on investment and impact of DEIB in organizations?

10. What is the future of DEIB?
11. What's not working in DEIB? Why? And how can it be resolved?
12. What are examples of DEIB's impact?
13. How should OD transform the language of DEIB to retain a seat at the table?
14. Where is the work of DEIB in relationship to maturity models?
15. What is the role of DEIB champions and sponsors in an organization? How can they be leveraged to affect change?
16. How can we build on the strengths of OD, developed over our history, to serve the needs of the future?
17. How do we lead/facilitate transformation in these times?
18. What new or reimagined OD practices are already impacting the context of DEIB? (Case studies)
19. What does “use of self” mean in the current state of complexity, and how is it showing up?
20. What role(s) can OD take on going forward?
21. We encourage submissions from around the world and inclusion of global perspectives.

The manuscripts submitted can be:

- » Regular-length articles (up to 5,000 words); a blind peer-review option is available.
- » Shorter articles (1,500–2,000 words)
- » Brief notes/thought pieces/provocations (approx. 600 words)

Deadlines

- » **Submit a brief abstract or proposal of your intent by January 15, 2024**
- » **Feedback to authors on abstracts and proposals by February 28, 2024**
- » **Manuscript submissions are due May 31, 2024**
- » **Feedback to authors on manuscripts by June 15, 2024**
- » **Final manuscript revisions are due August 15, 2024**

Follow the General Guidelines for *OD Review*
<https://www.odnetwork.org/page/submissions-odreview>

Submit all to Dave Jamieson at editor@odnetwork.org, John Bennett at bennettj@queens.edu, and Yabome Gilpin-Jackson at yabome@sldconsulting.org

cont'd.

Special Issue Guest Editors:

John L. Bennett, PhD, a professor of business and behavioral science at the McColl School of Business at Queens University of Charlotte, holds the Wayland H. Cato, Jr. Chair of Leadership. He teaches graduate courses in executive coaching, leadership, understanding social identities, and interpersonal and group dynamics. Before forming Lawton Associates, an executive coaching and consulting firm in 1997, John was an executive with the American Red Cross. He taught in the American University MSOD program for more than ten years. He is a scholar-practitioner who has written four books, including *Coaching for Change*, and numerous articles. In addition, John is on the editorial board of two journals. He is a past president of the Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (GSAEC), and in 2010 was named a Charter Fellow by The Lewin Center and Founding Fellow of the Institute of Coaching, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School. In 2023, he was named a Noble Fellow. He serves on the Board of Trustees of Fielding Graduate University and the Board of Directors of Rowan Education Partners. He can be reached at bennettj@queens.edu.

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson, PhD, is a scholar-practitioner who enjoys applying the behavioral and organization sciences to leadership development, organization development, facilitating strategic change, and systematic organizing for social change and transformation. She has worked internationally with corporate, non-profit/social profit and public sector organizations. She is the first Vice-President for People, Equity, and Inclusion at Simon Fraser University and associate faculty member of the Beedie School of Business. In addition to many academic peer-reviewed articles and book chapters she has published, her publications include *Transformation After Trauma*, *The Power of Resonance*, co-editor for the *Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation*, and the *We Will Lead Africa* book series and short story collections about global African experiences: *Identities*, *Ancestries*, *Destinies*. Yabome was named International African Woman of the Year by UK-based Women4Africa and was the first recipient of the US-based Organization Development Network's Emerging Organization Development Practitioner award. She also received the prestigious Harry Jerome Professional Excellence Award in Canada. She is a past Chair of the Organization Development Network Board. She can be reached at yabome@sldconsulting.org.

Organizational Trauma

Dear Esteemed Readers,

It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that we welcome you to this Special Section of the *Organization Development Review*, dedicated to the critical and timely theme of Organizational Trauma. As Guest Editors, we, Dr. Preston Lindsay and my colleague and Mentor, Dr. Colin Cooper, are honored to guide you through a collection of insightful contributions that delve into the complex dynamics of trauma within the organizational context. Organizations, like living entities, can undergo profound and transformative experiences. The concept of organizational trauma recognizes that just as individuals can face adversity, organizations too can encounter events that leave lasting imprints on their collective psyche.

This edition explores the nuanced dimensions of organizational trauma, shedding light on the impact of events such as crises, major changes, and conflicts on the health and well-being of an organization. As scholars and practitioners in the field of Organization Development, we understand the importance of recognizing and addressing organizational trauma. Our contributors, experts in their respective domains, share their research findings, practical insights, and case studies to help us comprehend the multifaceted nature of trauma within organizational systems. Through these diverse perspectives, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges posed by organizational trauma and, more importantly, strategies to foster resilience and recovery. In the pages that follow, you will find

thought-provoking articles that explore various facets of organizational trauma. Here is the corrected order in which they unfold:

“Unmasking the Invisible Chains: Exploring the Interplay of Organizational Trauma and Systemic Oppression for Sustainable Transformation” by **Dr. Preston V. L. Lindsay**. *Description:* Dr. Preston Lindsay’s article delves into the intricate connections between organizational trauma and systemic oppression. Unmasking the invisible chains that bind organizations, Lindsay provides profound insights into how these interconnected dynamics impact sustainable transformation. Through a lens of social justice and organizational change, the article offers practical strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and fostering sustainable organizational development.

“Could an Organization Be Suffering from PTSD?” by **Shana Hormann, Pat Vivian, Dimple Dhabalia, Mary Dumas, Susan Glisson**. *Description:* Drawing on a rich tapestry of real-world experiences, this collaborative article explores the profound question of whether organizations can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Authored by Shana Hormann, Pat Vivian, Dimple Dhabalia, Mary Dumas, and Susan Glisson, the article weaves together narratives from the field to shed light on the emotional and psychological impact of traumatic events within organizational contexts. The stories shared provide a poignant exploration of the lasting effects of trauma on organizational health.

“Creative Suffering for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Professionals Experiencing Organizational Trauma: A Conceptual Framework” by **Dr. Rajanique Modeste and Dr. Juliette Nelson**. *Description:* Dr. Rajanique Modeste and Dr. Juliette Nelson present a groundbreaking conceptual framework that addresses the unique experiences of BIPOC professionals facing organizational trauma. Through the lens of creative suffering, the article explores the nuanced challenges and opportunities for healing within the BIPOC community. This framework serves as a guiding light for organizations seeking to create inclusive environments that acknowledge and respond to the distinctive traumas faced by BIPOC individuals.

“Workplace Whiplash: A Transdisciplinary Approach to Trauma Caused by Sudden or Unexpected Change at Work” by **Tomaso Cairoli and Paul Taylor-Pitt, DProf.** *Description:* Paul Taylor-Pitt and Tomaso Cairoli embark on a transdisciplinary exploration of workplace trauma triggered by sudden or unexpected changes. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of rapid shifts within organizational settings and offers practical insights into mitigating the negative consequences. By bridging disciplines, the authors contribute valuable perspectives on understanding, managing, and recovering from workplace whiplash.

“Combating Organizational Trauma in Family-Owned Businesses” by **Adam Ben-Hanania, MA, Psy.D.(ABD)**. *Description:* Adam Ben-Hanania tackles the intricate dynamics of organizational

trauma within the context of family-owned businesses. This insightful article provides strategies for combatting trauma specific to this unique organizational structure. With a focus on familial relationships and business intricacies, Ben-Hanania's work offers practical guidance for preserving the health and resilience of family-owned enterprises facing the challenges of organizational trauma.

“Transformative Healing: A ‘Heart-Centered’ Transdisciplinary Framework for Addressing Organizational Trauma Arising from Oppression and Discrimination” by **Dr. Colin Cooper**. *Description:*

Dr. Colin Cooper presents a ‘heart-centered’ transdisciplinary framework for transformative healing in the context of organizational trauma arising from oppression and discrimination. This visionary article combines emotional intelligence, social justice, and organizational development to propose a holistic approach to healing. Cooper’s work encourages organizations to cultivate compassionate cultures that

address the root causes of trauma, fostering true transformation and lasting resilience.

These articles collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of organizational trauma, offering diverse perspectives, innovative frameworks, and practical insights for scholars, practitioners, and organizational leaders navigating the complex terrain of trauma in the workplace. Our contributors highlight the significance of creating adaptive and supportive organizational cultures, as well as the role of leadership in navigating through times of adversity.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the authors who have contributed their expertise and wisdom to make this Special Section a valuable resource for researchers, educators, consultants, and organizational leaders alike. The exploration of organizational trauma is a collective endeavor, and we hope this section serves as a catalyst for meaningful conversations and further inquiry into this vital aspect of organizational life. A special note of appreciation goes

to Associate Editor **Dr. Norm Jones** for his continuous support with editorial review and advocacy at the board level. His dedication has been instrumental in shaping the quality of our work. We also express our sincere gratitude to *ODR* Editor-in-Chief **Dr. Dave Jamieson** for his unwavering commitment to encouraging inclusivity and anti-oppressive praxis at the *ODR*. His leadership has significantly contributed to fostering a powerfully inclusive and diverse scholarly community.

Thank you for joining us on this journey of exploration and discovery. We invite you to engage with the content, reflect on its implications for your work and practice, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding organizational trauma.

In gratitude,

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“The relationship between systemic oppression and organizational trauma lies in the fact that oppressive systems that sustain a social construction of whiteness have created a culture of exclusion, inequity, and mistreatment within an organization.”

Unmasking the Invisible Chains

Exploring the Interplay of Organizational Trauma and Systemic Oppression for Sustainable Transformation

By Preston Vernard
Leicester Lindsay

Abstract

The article, “*Unmasking the Invisible Chains: Exploring the Nexus of Organizational Trauma and Systemic Oppression for Sustainable Transformation*,” intricately investigates the symbiotic relationship between organizational trauma and systemic oppression within workplace environments, with a particular emphasis on racialized trauma. Utilizing social constructionism and Black feminist theories as a conceptual framework, Lindsay delves into the complex interplay where systemic oppression perpetuates organizational trauma and vice versa.

The article sheds light on detrimental systemic consequences, including heightened stress and disrupted workplace relationships, underscoring the impediments to the professional growth of marginalized individuals due to discriminatory practices. Proposing a trauma-informed approach within the organizational development (OD) framework, it advocates for dismantling systemic oppression by addressing its impact through systematic transformation by way of inclusive policies and equitable practices.

Rooted in psychological perspectives, the article provides succinct recommendations, drawing from literature and case studies, to mitigate the negative effects of organizational trauma and foster sustainable transformation. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a comprehensive understanding of the intricate connection between systemic oppression and organizational trauma, highlighting the urgency of addressing these organizational dynamics for the creation of anti-oppressive and thriving workplaces.

Keywords: organizational trauma; systemic oppression; sustainable transformation; racialized trauma; workplace relationships; discriminatory practices; professional growth; organizational development (OD); trauma-informed approach; inclusive policies; equitable practices; psychological perspective; workplace dynamics

Introduction

Organizational trauma refers to the negative impact that traumatic events or chronic toxic conditions within an organization can have on its members. This trauma can arise from various sources such as workplace accidents, layoffs, unethical practices, hostile work environments, or systemic oppression (Vivian & Hormann, 2015).

Systemic oppression refers to the social and institutional structures that perpetuate discrimination, marginalization, and inequality based on factors such as race, gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic status. Systemic oppression can create and perpetuate power imbalances within organizations, leading to unfair treatment, discrimination, and harassment. The relationship between systemic oppression and

organizational trauma lies in the fact that oppressive systems that sustain a social construction of whiteness have created a culture of exclusion, inequity, and mistreatment within an organization. This can lead to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and trauma for individuals who are subjected to these oppressive practices. For individuals experiencing racialized trauma in the workplace, the impact of organizational trauma can be particularly significant (Vivian & Hormann, 2015). Racialized trauma refers to the psychological and emotional harm caused by experiences of racism, discrimination, or microaggressions based on one's race or ethnicity. When individuals of marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds face systemic oppression as a consequence of the social construction of whiteness within an organization, their experiences of racialized trauma can be exacerbated. The social construction of whiteness refers to the ways in which society has constructed and defined the concept of whiteness as a racial category. Whiteness is not a biological or genetic fact, but rather a social and historical construct that has been created and maintained through social, cultural, and institutional practices (Hill Collins, 2012). It encompasses a set of privileges, advantages, and norms that have been historically associated with people of European descent. The perpetuation of whiteness as the dominant racial category has had significant implications for racialized trauma in the workplace (Lindsay, 2020).

Whiteness has been associated with power and privilege in many societies. The construction of whiteness as the norm or standard against which other racial groups are measured creates power imbalances in the workplace. This power dynamic often leads to the marginalization and exclusion of non-white individuals, which can result in racialized trauma. Whiteness as a social construct has led to the normalization of discriminatory practices and biases in the workplace. This includes hiring and promotion biases, pay inequities, and microaggressions experienced by non-white individuals. These experiences of discrimination can contribute to racialized trauma, which refers to the psychological and emotional impact of experiencing racism and

racial inequality (Hill Collins, 2012). In some workplaces, diversity efforts may result in tokenism, where non-white individuals are hired or promoted to create the appearance of diversity without addressing the underlying power dynamics. Tokenism can contribute to racialized trauma by creating feelings of isolation, pressure to represent an entire racial group, and a lack of genuine inclusion. Whiteness as a social construct also influences cultural norms and expectations within the workplace. So why the emphasis on the social construction of whiteness? (Asey, 2022).

The Relationship Between Organizational Trauma and Systemic Oppression

Too often, workplace culture is shaped by the values, communication styles, and norms of the dominant white culture. In the fabric of society, the term “dominant white culture” weaves a narrative that extends beyond individuals to encompass prevailing norms, values, and practices shaped by the majority population, often identified as white or of European descent. This narrative recognizes the historical context and influence that accompany membership in the majority group, impacting various facets of societal structures. Within this narrative, the dynamics of power play a significant role, reflecting historical imbalances that have privileged individuals of white or European descent in social, economic, and political realms. These imbalances manifest in unequal access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making positions. The narrative further unfolds as it delves into the norms and values associated with dominant white culture, exploring the ideologies, aesthetics, and ways of life that shape societal expectations, social interactions, and perceptions of what is deemed “normal” or acceptable.

The institutional structures woven into this narrative bear the fingerprints of dominant white culture. These structures inadvertently perpetuate systems that may favor or disadvantage individuals based on their racial or ethnic backgrounds, establishing policies, practices, and traditions that contribute to enduring inequities. The narrative extends to representations in media,

education, and other cultural institutions, illustrating how they often mirror and perpetuate dominant white culture through literature, art, entertainment, and historical perspectives (Guess, 2006). Language and communication emerge as integral components of this narrative, reflecting how dominant white culture influences linguistic norms and communication styles. These elements contribute to the shaping of ideas, expressions, and their societal valuation, further underscoring the cultural influence at play. It's essential to underscore that within this narrative, the term “dominant white culture” does not negate the rich diversity within the white population (Hill Collins, 2012). The narrative recognizes the multitude of cultures, identities, and experiences that exist within any racial or ethnic group, including those categorized as part of the majority.

The narrative unfolds with a purpose—to raise awareness of how cultural norms and structures contribute to systemic inequalities. It seeks to promote inclusivity, understanding, and equity across diverse communities. Approaching this narrative requires sensitivity, openness, and a commitment to fostering dialogue that contributes to a more inclusive and just society. In the ongoing story of societal evolution, the narrative of dominant white culture invites reflection, dialogue, and a collective commitment to dismantling systemic inequalities. Dominant White Culture as defined before in very real ways creates challenges for individuals from different racial backgrounds who may feel pressure to assimilate or face difficulties in navigating the workplace environment. Addressing the perpetuation of racialized trauma in the workplace requires acknowledging and challenging the social construction of whiteness (Guess, 2006). This involves actively confronting biases and discrimination, and creating workspaces that value and uplift the experiences and contributions of individuals from all racial backgrounds. It also requires implementing policies and practices that ensure equal opportunities and equitable treatment for all employees, regardless of their racial or ethnic background (Hill Collins, 2012). Though when organizations fail to

address these challenges actively, the condition of organizational trauma would seem to emerge as a natural outcome (Tafoya, 2017). Organizational trauma can affect individuals experiencing racialized trauma in several ways. Firstly, it can lead to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional distress, as individuals may constantly be on guard for potential discriminatory acts or unfair treatment (Lindsay, 2020). This can have a detrimental impact on their mental well-being and overall job satisfaction. Secondly, organizational trauma can erode trust and undermine relationships within the workplace. When individuals experience or witness systemic oppression, it can create a sense of alienation, and division among coworkers, further exacerbating the trauma experienced by marginalized individuals. Lastly, the condition of organizational trauma can impede professional growth and advancement for individuals of marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds. Discriminatory practices, biased decision-making, and limited opportunities can hinder their career progression, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and reinforcing the trauma experienced in the workplace. It can also deter folks of oppressed identities from speaking out against oppressive systems or seeking justice due to fear of retaliation or further harm. Recognizing and addressing the relationship between organizational trauma and systemic oppression is critical for strategically creating psychologically safe and equitable organizational environments (Asey, 2022).

Overall, the impact of organizational trauma on individuals experiencing racialized harm/trauma in the workplace is profound. It perpetuates a harmful cycle of systemic oppression, creates a hostile work environment, and significantly affects the mental well-being and professional development of marginalized individuals. Addressing and dismantling systemic oppression within organizations is essential to preventing and mitigating the negative impact of organizational trauma on the system and its internal stakeholders (Stein, 1991). Organization development (OD) science and practice can play a vital role in comprehending and addressing the issue

of systemic oppression and organizational trauma. Organizations need to implement trauma-informed practices, promote diversity and inclusion, provide support systems, and actively work to dismantle oppressive structures to create a healthier and more equitable workplace.

Below, I provide OD techniques I have found in my practice work to be necessary in diagnosing and designing interventions for organizational trauma as a consequence of unchecked oppressive violence in the workplace:

- » **Assessing and Acknowledging the Issue:** OD practitioners can help organizations assess the presence of systemic oppression and organizational trauma. This involves conducting comprehensive assessments, collecting data on organizational culture, policies, and practices, and identifying areas where inequities and trauma may be occurring (Lindsay, 2020). By acknowledging and naming these issues, organizations can begin the process of change.
- » **Creating Inclusive and Equitable Cultures:** OD can support organizations in fostering inclusive and equitable cultures that value diversity and promote fairness. This includes revising policies and procedures to eliminate bias and discrimination, creating diversity and inclusion initiatives, and establishing accountability measures to ensure equity in decision-making processes.
- » **Training and Education:** OD interventions can include training programs that raise awareness about systemic oppression, unconscious bias, and privilege. These initiatives can help employees and leaders develop a deeper understanding of the impact of their actions and behaviors, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic workplace culture.
- » **Facilitating Difficult Conversations:** OD practitioners can facilitate dialogues and conversations about systemic oppression and organizational trauma. By creating safe spaces for individuals to share their experiences and perspectives, organizations can begin the process of healing, learning, and transforming their culture.

- » **Establishing Supportive Structures:** OD can assist in establishing support structures and mechanisms to address the impact of systemic oppression and organizational trauma. This may include establishing employee resource groups, mentoring programs, or employee assistance programs specifically tailored to the needs of marginalized individuals.
- » **Leadership Development:** OD interventions can focus on developing inclusive leadership competencies. This involves equipping leaders with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to recognize and address systemic oppression, promote equity, and create psychologically safe environments.
- » **Trauma-Informed Practices:** OD can incorporate trauma-informed approaches in organizational practices. This involves creating environments that are sensitive to the needs of individuals who have experienced trauma, providing appropriate support and resources, and integrating trauma-informed principles into organizational policies and procedures.
- » **Continuous Learning and Improvement:** OD emphasizes a continuous learning and improvement mindset. By regularly evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, gathering feedback from employees, and making adjustments, organizations can ensure ongoing progress in addressing systemic oppression and organizational trauma.

In the complex landscape of organizational dynamics, addressing systemic oppression and organizational trauma is not merely a task but a continuous and systemic effort. Organizational Development (OD) practitioners play a pivotal role in this endeavor by fostering collaboration among organizational leaders, employees, and stakeholders. Together, they strive to forge a shared vision and commitment to transformative change. By integrating OD principles and practices, organizations embark on a journey towards cultivating healthier, more inclusive, and equitable environments for all members. However, the consequences of neglecting the imperative to

address organizational trauma and systemic oppression are profound and extend beyond individual well-being to impact the organization as a whole (Rahimi & Aghababaei, 2020). The absence of evidence-based interventions can lead to a cascade of challenges: Unaddressed organizational trauma and systemic oppression can precipitate adverse mental health effects among employees. The toll manifests as heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and burn-out, fostering a toxic work environment. The repercussions include diminished productivity, increased absenteeism, and a pervasive sense of unease (Stuart, 1996).

Organizations that turn a blind eye to these issues risk grappling with high turnover rates, particularly among marginalized or traumatized employees. A perceived lack of support, fairness, or growth opportunities prompts talented individuals to seek employment elsewhere. This exodus disrupts productivity, inflates recruitment and training costs, and tarnishes the organization's reputation. The unresolved trauma and systemic oppression corrode employee engagement and productivity (Stuart, 1996). Those who feel marginalized or traumatized are less likely to fully commit to their work, leading to lower job satisfaction, diminished creativity and innovation, and an overall decline in performance. Trust, a cornerstone of effective collaboration, erodes when organizational trauma and systemic oppression are left unaddressed. This erosion impedes effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, fostering a hostile and divisive work environment. Organizations known for perpetuating or tolerating systemic oppression or ignoring organizational trauma face severe damage to their reputation. In today's interconnected world, instances of mistreatment or discrimination spread rapidly through social media, affecting an organization's brand image, customer relationships, and ability to attract top talent.

The failure to address systemic oppression and organizational trauma exposes organizations to legal and compliance risks. Discrimination, harassment, or mistreatment may result in lawsuits, investigations by regulatory bodies, and reputational harm. Financial penalties and damage to

standing within the industry are potential consequences. The diminished contributions of employees who feel marginalized or traumatized hinder innovation and creativity. In such environments, diversity of thought wanes, leading to missed opportunities for growth, effective problem-solving, and adaptability to change. The narrative of neglecting organizational trauma and systemic oppression is one fraught with significant challenges, impacting both the individuals within the organization and the organization itself. It underscores the critical importance of proactive and evidence-based interventions to foster a workplace environment characterized by well-being, inclusivity, and sustained success.

Addressing the Organizational Trauma and Systemic Oppression

In examining the ramifications of neglecting organizational trauma and systemic oppression, it becomes evident that the consequences extend beyond individual well-being, permeating through organizational culture, performance, and the bottom line. A proactive stance in addressing these issues is not merely an ethical imperative; it is a fundamental necessity for fostering a healthy, inclusive, and thriving workplace environment, as underscored by Rahimi and Aghababaei (2020). However, delving into the complexities of organizational trauma and systemic oppression is not devoid of challenges. Initiating organizational change efforts to confront these issues often encounters resistance and fear due to various reasons. The fear of the unknown surfaces as change disrupts familiarity and introduces uncertainty, unsettling individuals who find comfort in the known and accustomed. Concerns about job security, alterations in roles and responsibilities, or the potential for failure amplify the apprehension associated with change (Simuth, 2017).

Another facet of resistance emerges from the perceived loss of control. The necessity to relinquish familiar routines, processes, or ways of working unsettles individuals, fostering resistance. This stems from a sense of powerlessness or fear that the change will negatively impact

autonomy and decision-making abilities. Human inclination toward the status quo further contributes to resistance. People, as creatures of habit, derive comfort and security from familiarity. Introducing change challenges this status quo, requiring individuals to step out of their comfort zones. Consequently, resistance arises from the desire to maintain existing ways of doing things. The threat to identity is another influential factor in resistance to change. The transformative nature of change may challenge individuals' sense of identity and expertise, necessitating the acquisition of new skills or the adoption of different mindsets. This potential loss of competence, status, or recognition associated with prior roles or expertise becomes a source of resistance.

Emotional attachment to the past within organizations also fuels resistance. Shared history, traditions, and emotional connections form a tapestry within work environments. Introducing change disrupts these emotional bonds, leading individuals to resist the change due to their attachment to the past. From a neuropsychological standpoint, fear and resistance in the face of change evoke various implications at the individual level. The amygdala, responsible for processing emotions, activates in response to fear and resistance, triggering the fight-or-flight response. This physiological response increases stress, anxiety, and diminishes the capacity for rational decision-making. Furthermore, fear and resistance pose a threat to psychological safety, releasing stress hormones such as cortisol. Elevated cortisol levels impair cognitive functioning, hinder learning and memory, and heighten emotional reactivity. Cognitive biases also come to the forefront, with individuals exhibiting confirmation bias by seeking information that supports their resistance to change while dismissing contrary evidence. Additionally, the engagement of loss aversion leads individuals to focus on potential losses rather than potential gains associated with the change. Resistance to learning and change, rooted in fear and resistance, hampers the brain's neuroplasticity—the ability to rewire and adapt to new information and experiences. This resistance presents a challenge for

individuals to learn new skills, embrace different perspectives, and alter behavior patterns.

Effectively addressing fear and resistance necessitates the creation of a psychologically safe environment. Providing ample support and resources, coupled with actively managing emotions and concerns, becomes imperative. Understanding the neuropsychological implications equips change leaders to design interventions mitigating fear and resistance, facilitating a smoother transition toward the desired organizational changes. Overcoming fear and resistance in the facilitation of organizational change proves challenging, but implementing strategic steps can navigate and address these obstacles. In this regard, I recommend practitioners and leaders engage in the following steps:

Step 1—Gather Data, Understand and Communicate the Need for Change:

Clearly communicate the reasons and rationale behind the proposed change. Help individuals understand the benefits and positive outcomes that can result from the change. Address any concerns or fears openly and honestly, providing information and data to support your message. Organizational assessments are essential at this stage. Organizational assessments are of paramount importance in the change process due to their multifaceted contributions. These assessments offer a panoramic view of an organization's current state, encompassing its strengths, vulnerabilities, opportunities, and potential pitfalls. This comprehensive understanding serves as a cornerstone for informed decision-making, allowing leaders to discern the most effective avenues for improvement. By pinpointing specific areas or processes in need of adjustment, these assessments facilitate targeted interventions. This precision contrasts with broad, sweeping changes and enhances the efficient allocation of resources. Furthermore, assessments ensure that proposed changes are congruent with an organization's overarching objectives, thereby aligning the change process with the broader strategic trajectory.

Step 2—Create a Shared Vision: Involve employees in the change process by creating a shared vision of the desired future state. Engage them in conversations to understand their perspectives, ideas, and potential barriers to change. By involving employees in the visioning process, you can foster a sense of ownership and commitment to the change.

Step 3—Provide Information and Resources:

Offer comprehensive information and resources about the change, including training, coaching, and support. Provide employees with the knowledge and tools they need to navigate the change successfully. This can help alleviate fear and build confidence in embracing the new ways of working.

Step 4—Address Concerns and Resistance:

Actively listen to employees' concerns and address their resistance with empathy and understanding. Take the time to acknowledge their fears and emotions, and provide reassurance where possible. Encourage open dialogue and create a safe space for individuals to express their opinions and ask questions.

Step 5—Build a Coalition of Support:

Identify and engage influential individuals or key stakeholders who can champion the change. These change agents can help alleviate fears, provide support, and encourage others to embrace the change. Their positive influence can create a ripple effect throughout the organization.

Step 6—Break the Change into Manageable Steps:

Large-scale change can be overwhelming and contribute to fear and resistance. Break the change process into smaller, manageable steps or milestones. This approach allows individuals to see progress, build confidence, and gradually adapt to the new ways of working.

Step 7—Celebrate Successes and Recognize Efforts:

Celebrate milestones and successes along the change journey. Recognize and appreciate individuals and teams for their efforts and contributions to the change process. This can

foster a sense of accomplishment, reinforce positive behaviors, and encourage continued engagement.

Step 8—Provide Ongoing Support and Training:

Offer ongoing support and training to help individuals adapt to the change. This can include additional coaching, mentoring, or skill-building sessions. By investing in their development and growth, you demonstrate your commitment to their success during the change process.

Step 9—Lead by Example:

Leadership plays a vital role in overcoming resistance to change. Leaders should model the desired behaviors and values, demonstrating their own commitment to the change. Their actions should align with the messages they communicate, inspiring confidence and trust in the change process.

Step 10—Evaluate and Adjust:

Continuously evaluate the progress and impact of the change initiative. Solicit feedback from employees and make adjustments as necessary. Flexibility and adaptability are key to overcoming resistance and ensuring that the change is aligned with the evolving needs of the organization.

I leave you with this, the transformative journey through organizational change beckons us to not only navigate the intricate landscape but also to delve into the depths of self-awareness, truth, and courage. As organizational development practitioners and psychologists, our commitment to this odyssey requires an unwavering acknowledgment of our own capacities, biases, and potential blind spots. Embracing self-awareness becomes the compass guiding us through the twists and turns of organizational transformation. It is the keystone that allows us to align our actions with the truth—acknowledging systemic oppression and organizational trauma as they are, not as we wish them to be. In doing so, we summon the courage to confront uncomfortable realities and champion authentic change.

This journey transcends the academic or theoretical; it challenges us to embody the principles we advocate. Truth becomes

the bedrock upon which we build, steering us away from superficial solutions toward substantive and enduring change. It is in this truth that courage finds its foothold—an audacious courage to challenge the status quo, dismantle oppressive structures, and create environments where authenticity and inclusivity thrive. As we chart this course, let us be attuned to the rhythm of self-awareness, anchored in the truth, and propelled by the courage to effect profound and lasting transformation. As organization development and organizational psychology practitioners, this is our collective odyssey, an opportunity not just to reshape organizations but to redefine our roles as catalysts for positive change in the world.

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“Our field is still young and relies on the dedication of a diversity of practitioners to take bold steps to deepen the ways we help organizations and systems to heal.”

Could an Organization Be Suffering from PTSD?

By Shana Hormann,
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Dimple Dhabalia,
Mary Dumas,
Susan M. Glisson

Abstract:

Organizational trauma cuts across all sectors, slamming organizations from without, erupting from within, or slowly poisoning the organizational culture over time. The authors share stories from their experiences as practitioners, leaders and consultants who have worked with organizations and teams to identify sources of trauma, understand the resulting destructive organizational patterns, and gain constructive strategies for organizational resilience and well-being.

Keywords: Organizational Trauma, organizational culture, workplace trauma, PTSD, Secondary Traumatic Stress, Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, racism, critical incident stress, moral injury, brave spaces, conflict management, reflective practice, community conflict, inter-generational harm

Could an organization be suffering from PTSD? That question, posed in mid-1990s, started Pat Vivian and Shana Hormann on a quest to understand organizational trauma.

Beginning in the 1980s, volumes of materials were written about trauma, trauma response, PTSD, STS, vicarious traumatization, and compassion fatigue along with strategies for organizations to deal with individuals—clients or staff—who suffered from any of these maladies. “Regardless of their theoretical frameworks, all constructs refer to the negative reactions of helping professionals specific to their work with trauma survivors” (Bell, 2003, p. 514). A multitude of frameworks offered ways to understand trauma symptoms and how to address them. Strategies included individual self-care (Stamm, 1999; Violanti & Gehrke, 2004), team-based approaches, (Munroe, Shay, et al., 1995; Figley, 2002) and institutional responses (Catherall, 1995; Bell, 2003; Violanti & Gehrke, 2004). None of the thinking addressed the organization as a whole.

The *individual* remained the focus of the trauma impacts and interventions.

Using their disciplines of social work and systems psychology to understand what they were seeing in not-for-profit organizations, Vivian and Hormann began by asking one question: might organizations begin to exhibit the same symptoms as individuals? Using this as a starting point, they developed a framework for understanding traumatized organizations. They noticed patterns that first led them to the insight that an organization’s culture was influenced by its mission and work (Vivian and Hormann, 2013) and that the culture was passed on from one generation of workers to the next (Schein, 1990; Diamond, 1993). An organization’s culture was like an individual’s personality, influenced by internal and external factors. Putting together their understanding of culture with observed evidence of trauma in organizations, Vivian and Hormann labeled this “organizational trauma.” They were in close communication with a trusted colleague, Howard F. Stein, who

gave them the first definition of organizational trauma:

“Groups, for example workplace organizations, can experience traumas just as individuals and families can. We speak of September 11, 2001 as a ‘national trauma,’ not just metaphorically, but literally. The protective emotional membrane was penetrated, violated, perhaps destroyed. At any level, trauma is an experience for which a person-family-group is emotionally (not only cognitively) unprepared, an experience that overwhelms one’s defensive (self-protective) structure and leaves one feeling totally vulnerable and at least temporarily helpless” (Personal communication, 9/28/04).

Since their groundbreaking paper *Trauma and Healing* was published (Vivian and Hormann, 2002), the work of practitioners and leaders to recognize and understand traumatized systems—and help them heal—has broadened and deepened. Most recently, the world has suffered from a deadly pandemic. In the United States the extra-judicial killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis exposed a dangerous reality. The systemic unraveling of laws and policies protecting women and individuals in the trans community. Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States have made public the horrors of missing and murdered women and children as well as the experiences of Native boarding school survivors (<https://boardingschoolhealing.org>). Unhealed trauma and traumatization, historic and current, is fatal to the health of people in Communities of Color and Indigenous Groups (Lebron, D., et al, 2015; Kirkinis, K., et al, 2018; Kleinman, B. Russ, E. 2020; Gameon, J. A. and Skewes, M. C., 2021).

Our field is still young and relies on the dedication of a diversity of practitioners to take bold steps to deepen the ways we help organizations and systems to heal. This paper highlights the varied ways practitioners have used the ideas and framework of organizational trauma and healing. The authors are practitioners, leaders, and consultants who have worked

Types and Sources of Organizational Trauma		
Type	Source	Example
Single devastating event	External	Public shooting, loss of funding, severe weather destruction
Single devastating event	Internal	Suicide of leader, abusive behavior, violence, insider embezzlement
Ongoing wounding	External	Pandemics, threats or overt hostility directed at organization from the community
Ongoing wounding	Internal	Abusive or destructive leadership practices, harassment or sexual violence
Empathic nature of the work	Internal	Unclear boundaries, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma
Redemptive nature of the work	Internal	Internalized judgment, guilt, depression, despair

*Vivian & Hormann, 2013

Chart 1. *Types and Sources of Trauma*

with organizations and teams to navigate through organizational trauma, so that they may begin to make sense of their experiences and gain constructive ways of thinking about organizational dynamics. We are sharing stories from our experience to demonstrate the pervasiveness and sources of trauma in organizations as well as strategies for increased organizational resilience and well-being.

Background

Organizational trauma may result from a single devastating event, from the effects of many deleterious events, or from the impact of cumulative trauma arising from the nature of the organization’s work (Vivian and Hormann, 2015). Organizational trauma cuts across all sectors, slamming organizations from without, erupting from within, or slowly poisoning the organizational culture over time. Leaders often struggle to identify organizational trauma; the resulting destructive patterns are then misidentified as the fault of individuals or teams rather than systemic. Therefore, strategies to change the hurtful and negative organizational dynamics are largely unsuccessful. *Chart 1* (adapted from Vivian and Hormann, 2013) describes types and sources of organizational trauma with examples.

Stories reveal the events, patterns of behavior, systems, and frameworks operating within the system (Kemeny, Goodman, Karash, 1994). Identified patterns often hold clues as to sources of trauma and sources for healing (Brown, 1997). Acquiring and understanding systemic information makes clear whether the organization is moving toward the existing anxiety and therefore toward healing, or constructing defenses against the anxiety (Hormann, 2007).

Reflection Prompts and Questions

Prompts and Questions we used in the following stories to demonstrate how we approach our work and how we reflect on our practice:

» What made you think traumatization was occurring/had occurred? (This is a reminder that our practices have breadth that enables us to see from different perspectives. It is useful for other practitioners to know that they can use their entry frameworks to recognize symptoms of trauma/traumatization).

Describe how you helped the client (or your organization).

What key approaches/frameworks did you use?

- » Describe how you helped the client (or your organization).
- » What key approaches/frameworks did you use?
- » What were the outcomes?
- » What did you learn from this work?

Story #1

Storytelling as an Intervention for Healing Organizational Trauma

Dimple D. Dhabalia

For close to two decades I worked for a branch of US Citizenship and Immigration Services focused on asylum and refugee adjudications. Occupational mental health challenges including vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, critical incident stress, compassion fatigue, and moral injury, were common experiences for our staff, but the stigma associated with mental health led people to suffer in silence for decades.

The work itself, while meaningful, was also fast-paced, high-stakes, and stressful. This stress combined with the politicization of the work by different administrations, and the organization's perpetual unwillingness to acknowledge, let alone address, the corresponding mental health realities, created a frustrated staff who often felt unseen, undervalued, and disrespected, and a traumatized culture where exhaustion, burnout, isolation, and jadedness were the norm.

This was the culture within which we were operating in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began ravaging the world. Very quickly organizational leaders decided to pivot to 100% telework; however, their expectations of staff productivity remained the same with no consideration for how uncertainty, grief, and social isolation were impacting people. This lack of consideration only further exacerbated staff discontent and further traumatized the organizational culture.

I oversaw a small staff focused on workforce well-being, and like everyone else, we didn't know much about the virus wreaking havoc around the world. However, we did understand the resulting experiences of fear, anxiety, grief, and social isolation our colleagues were trying to

navigate. In response, we launched a series of virtual storytelling circles we called "coffee chats," to create brave spaces for people to come together and openly share their experiences.

We call these "brave" spaces because this term, as noted by Beth Strano in her poem, *An Invitation to Brave Space* (2023), acknowledges that there is no such thing as a safe space since "we all carry scars and have caused wounds." It recognizes, and allows for, the imperfections of reality that pop up in moments of vulnerability in community, encouraging people to share pieces of themselves without minimization or fear of offending others.

Storytelling is a powerful intervention with tremendous potential because it not only acknowledges the complexity of our experiences, but it also soothes our hard-wired need to connect with others, making us feel safe. Story circles are a vehicle for storytelling specifically designed to create brave spaces for individuals to express their emotions, and find solace, empathy, and understanding from those who can relate to their experiences, creating the conditions for transformative journeys of healing. Integrating story circles into the culture of an organization takes time, especially since we've been conditioned for so long to keep our thoughts and emotions to ourselves. Part of this process is helping staff and leaders understand that vulnerability doesn't require us to share our whole life's story, just our humanity.

We structured our coffee chats to last between thirty and forty-five minutes and limited them to no more than twelve people and a facilitator to ensure that everyone who wanted to would have a chance to speak. While we initially selected themes that related to issues with which we knew the workforce was struggling, as new issues arose—a potential furlough, the murder of George Floyd, the challenges of homeschooling children—the structure made it easy to pivot and create corresponding chats.

Within months of starting, we were offering eight to ten different coffee chats each week, facilitated by various levels of leaders. Feedback from staff told us that having their stories witnessed by others

who were experiencing similar challenges validated their own experiences and served as a reminder that they were connected to something bigger and weren't alone during a time when so many around the world felt disconnected and isolated. Since the chats were open to the entire workforce, people had an opportunity to get to know their colleagues from across the organization, which didn't often happen. In addition, by engaging senior leaders as facilitators, we gave our staff unique opportunities to get to know their leaders and vice versa on a human-to-human level.

While much of the healing through storytelling happens on an individual level, it's important to remember that we work in organizations made up of systems that were created by humans. If the humans are traumatized—and almost every human being has been—these systems will be, too. Using story circles to help individuals within the organizations heal, ultimately will contribute to healing the organization as well.

Story #2

Mediation and Collaboration

Mary Dumas

My work starts with the first call with the organization or agency. As a professional mediator and collaboration consultant, I am listening to learn from requests and questions. I make note of current conflicts and intergenerational issues. In this case, the director of a multicultural family court service for a rural county spoke to me about the complexity of cases and types of staff issues that can arise when serving families in crisis. Tensions were building given the mix of lived experiences, moral, and ethical outlooks of the staff. Differing professional responses and bystander impacts added friction. She hoped a resilience building initiative, conducted in her final year before retirement, might focus improvement conversations and build camaraderie. I noted that some events described could be big T and small t traumas, though these were not my observations to name or share.

My observations did inform the design of a series of structured reflections (staff

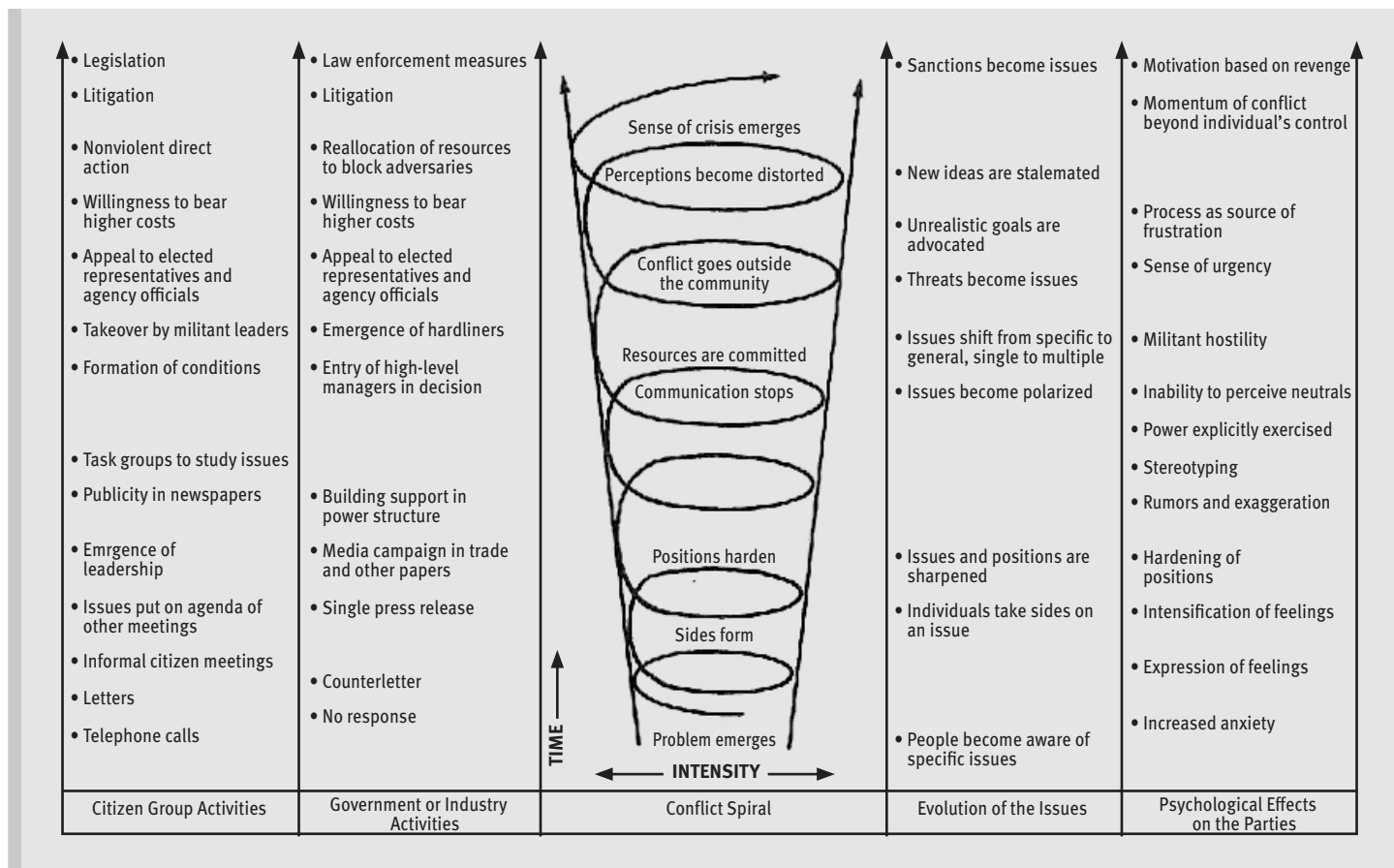


Figure 1. Spiral of Unmanaged Conflict (Carpenter, S. and Kennedy, W., 2001)

interviews, anonymous survey, private worksheets) and staff dialogue sessions to explore the input generated. Privately, staff reflected on the complexities of conflict (Figure 1) experienced at work. The initial all-staff retreat focused on ideas for improvements and concerns. Two subsequent sessions focused on collectively digesting new learning. Regular leadership coaching sessions were held parallel to the group sessions. There was no rush in the process of learning what to address now, next, or soon.

Over a six-month period, staff practiced wondering aloud when things didn't feel quite right, noticing and naming

known conflict patterns, and identifying pathways for resolution, healing, and repair. The practice of structured pauses for reflection and emerging insights, as well as silence in the sessions gave space for the unaddressed harms and impacts to arrive at the table. As staff identified and raised topics for discussion, multiple options for healing and repair were generated. Together their diverse experiences were translated into systems-focused actions on key issues identified. Shared metrics provided ongoing feedback check points to navigate momentum, failures, and emerging information. Together staff created a shared vocabulary and muscle

memory on how to stay connected to each other, to access needed information, and to generate personal hope.

Story #3 Healing Divided Communities Susan M. Glisson

Healing divided communities in order to create equitable and inclusive places is no easy feat. Having facilitated community dialogue processes in Mississippi communities with fraught racial histories, I have discerned key ingredients for acknowledging violent racist histories and changing mindsets to address the legacies of those histories. Where typical projects with goals for equity and justice often begin by identifying preferred outcomes, the work I engage in has been more effective not by beginning with a destination in mind but rather by focusing on practicing respectful dialogue to ground groups in trust and courageous conversations about difficult issues. Such dialogue takes place in a heart space more than in an intellectual space, and the resultant community trust

While much of the healing through storytelling happens on an individual level, it's important to remember that we work in organizations made up of systems that were created by humans. If the humans are traumatized—and almost every human being has been—these systems will be, too. Using story circles to help individuals within the organizations heal, ultimately will contribute to healing the organization as well.

is necessary for purposeful, inclusive, and just social action.

Efforts to Shift the Community Narrative

In 2004, local leaders in Neshoba County, MS, sought to honor the three victims of the civil rights murders on the 40th anniversary of their deaths on June 21, 2004. They invited me to facilitate that process. In the four decades since the murders, none of the over twenty suspects in the murders had ever been held accountable by the State of Mississippi.

At the first meeting, while all the attendees knew the details of the murders, and, largely, knew who the murderers were, the local community simply did not talk about them. Young people from the area who left Mississippi were shocked when people from outside of the state told them the story of their own hometown. The group described a pall that hung over the town, preventing advancement.

While participants shared similar hopes of improving the local community, they had different reference points of meaning for why and how to pursue that goal. Suggestions varied across a wide range; there was no consensus, except for cordiality in lieu of disagreement. The only commonality was that each idea focused on specific action steps. The traumatized community left too much unsaid; at that point, the participants did not have sufficient courage to be vulnerable enough to share what each person was thinking.

Creating Safe Space for Dialogue

At the next meeting the following week, we stopped focusing on outcomes. It was important just to get people to sit in a circle and to share their stories. Over the next several meetings, the group built a sense of trust through their stories and learned of the wide spectrum of consequences related to their shared histories.

Not only were the black participants frightened to live in their community and angry that the victims and their families had not received justice, they feared that the bold freedom of the known murderers reflected lingering racism and complicity

among town whites and prevented access to opportunities for black citizens. They doubted that white residents cared about the murders.

For white participants, the events instantiated other, equally complex emotions. There was hope that the history would stay buried. There was shame and guilt that such horrific attacks occurred and that the white establishment had not held anyone accountable, especially when the names of law enforcement officials and Klansmen who committed the crime were known. There was anger and resentment that all Whites were somehow to blame for what many viewed as the actions of a few. And white participants received criticism from others in town who were still glad it happened.

Members from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians broadened the group's understanding of the role race played for their tribe in the cauldron of black and white relations. Their experience of the murders and their aftermath did not fit neatly into the black/white paradigm.

Through that initial process to create a safe space, the group began to dispel myths about each other and, finally, to unpack one of the most notorious civil rights murders in American history that had happened in their backyards yet had essentially become a public secret in town, a secret that prevented healing and much needed community building in the town.

A Path Forward

On the 40th anniversary of the murders, the Philadelphia Coalition issued a call for action to join them in a show of power to pressure state officials to pursue the case. Members of the victims' families, local citizens, the state's governor, four congressmen, civil rights veterans, and 1,500 other stakeholders joined the Coalition at the public event. The event made international news and began the narrative shift the Coalition hoped to achieve.

Within seven months, the Coalition convinced the state attorney general and local district attorney to convene a local grand jury, which indicted Killen for the murders. Exactly forty-one years after the

murders, and one year after the community's call for justice, a biracial jury of his peers convicted Killen on three counts of manslaughter. A measure of justice achieved through healing and truth-telling provided a basis for substantial changes to unfold in the aftermath of the conviction.

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“The model of creative suffering is instrumental in identifying and articulating the nuances that often go unnoticed or unaddressed in traditional organizational models. It sheds light on the complex dynamics between disengagement and organizational citizenship—two critical aspects of the workplace experience.”

Creative Suffering for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Professionals Experiencing Organizational Trauma

A Conceptual Framework

By Rajanique Modeste
and Juliette Nelson

Abstract

Considering the implications of organizational trauma, several factors impact the employee experience, performance, and behaviors including organizational culture, leadership, and psychological safety. When challenged, the employee's ability to effectively apply their knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors to meet professional and organizational objectives is limited. While existing research points to certain aspects of this phenomenon, those theoretical recommendations do not encompass the full extent of what this looks like, especially for professionals identifying as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC), who, in the presence of intersectionalities that already impact their lived experience, are forced to build a level of resilience that their counterparts may not always have to do.

This multi-methods grounded research study introduces the theory of creative suffering and conceptualizes the employee experience with creative suffering in the midst of organizational trauma. It amplifies the varying experiences with creative suffering from the lens of BIPOC professionals who have faced organizational trauma. The authors leveraged surveys and focus group interviews to develop a conceptual framework for the factors encompassing what they call creative suffering. 100 individuals participated in the survey and 11 among them provided in-depth insight in a focus group or interview. The study found that in the face of organization trauma, caused by marginalization, lack of support, and a poor organizational culture, they produce affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses that inhibit how they thrive and function in the workplace. Additionally, cultural factors, including spirituality, collective cultures, and socio-economics contributed to how BIPOC employees processed their experience with creative suffering.

Keywords: BIPOC, organizational culture, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility and Belonging, organizational trauma, organizational citizenship behavior, leadership, employee performance

Introduction

Various factors within an organization, including its culture and leadership style, are crucial in shaping employee behavior and performance. However, when employees are subjected to adverse conditions such as pseudo-transformational leadership, work-home conflicts, job-person

imbalances, and overall organizational dysfunction, their ability to effectively utilize their knowledge, skills, and abilities is significantly hampered.

The study pays particular attention to the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) professionals, acknowledging the unique challenges they face due to intersectionalities that

impact their lived experiences. Current literature falls short of capturing the full breadth of these challenges, especially in the context of organizational trauma. By introducing the theory of creative suffering, this research aims to conceptualize the employee experience within such a traumatic environment. Employing semi-structured interviews and collecting relevant data, the authors aim to construct a comprehensive conceptual framework, which will encapsulate the factors contributing to creative suffering, particularly as experienced by BIPOC professionals who have endured organizational trauma.

The findings of this study are anticipated to lay a foundational groundwork for future research in this area. They aim to enhance understanding of how creative suffering manifests across different demographics in the workplace and how organizations can effectively navigate these challenges. Ultimately, this research seeks to guide leaders, consultants, and workplace specialists in applying these insights to foster more inclusive, equitable workplace environments and improve employee performance.

Literature Review

Understanding the emergence of creative suffering warrants a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings that speak to how human behavior is understood, especially in organizations. That understanding can be approached from a psychoanalytic lens in which thoughts and feelings repressed through unconsciousness are pushed to the surface through consciousness (Barabasz, 2014). This psychological phenomenon was explored by Freud, who was interested in understanding the conscious, unconscious, and preconscious factors that can inform human behavior (Neukrug & Bishop, 2015).

While not rooted in organizational research, psychoanalysis is valuable in understanding how people function within organizations, groups, and teams (Barabasz, 2016). It bridges employees' unconscious thoughts with organizational functioning (Nathan & Allcorn, 2022). Investigating what is under the surface

provides a rich understanding of an organization's culture, functions, and dynamics (Barabasz, 2014). While research connecting psychoanalysis with organizational behavior has brought an understanding of employee job satisfaction, motivation, and engagement, there is more to explore and conceptualize about the employee responses triggered by organizational trauma.

Self-Determination Theory

The self-determination theory can best explain how employees respond to organizational trauma, which addresses different facets of human orientations, including self-regulation, motivation, and the impact of their social environments (Ross & Barnes, 2018). It suggests that individuals are psychologically and innately driven by autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ross & Barnes, 2018). Therefore, the environments and conditions in which human beings interact are critical in driving the extent to which they proactively engage or passively disconnect themselves (Mat et al., 2019).

The current literature on organizational behavior significantly emphasizes the importance of these factors in fostering positive employee performance and behavioral outcomes. Research suggests that self-determination, in its theoretical context, explains the impact of management and organizational culture on employee motivation and wellness (Rigby & Ryan, 2018). It fuels employee psychological safety, which signifies employees' comfort in being innovative and taking risks in the workplace (Yang et al., 2019). After all, when employees have an environment in which they can leverage their creative autonomy to create and innovate, the organization, by default, benefits (Yang et al., 2019).

While research focuses on the positive outcomes that result from the application of self-determination theory, there is more to understand about the consequences of a decrease in psychological safety. This creates an opportunity to conceptualize how employees respond in the case that their autonomy, competency, and relatedness are compromised in their work environment. While it can be understood that this

may decrease employees' psychological safety, there needs to be a conceptualized approach to visualizing this experience for employees.

Organizational Trauma

The literature on organizational trauma describes the various factors encompassing traumatic experiences employees face in the workplace. Literature on organizational trauma often emphasizes an unexpected trigger occurring while a person is at work (Kahn, 2003). Shana (2018) describes organizational trauma as a direct or indirect "blow" that individuals working in a group or organizational level experience. Similar to occurrences outside of the workplace, employees are prone to traumatic events, whether it be from an act of God, the level of risk involved in their work, or interpersonal experiences in the workplace. Organizational trauma triggers can yield an individual or collective impact. However, there is an opportunity for research to center organizational dynamics and culture as the cause of trauma. This also calls for the discussion of what organizational trauma looks like over a sustained period of time.

Psychotraumatology has long studied the concept of trauma, specifically post-traumatic stress disorder, which individuals experience from a life-threatening event. Recent research sought to explain the phenomenon experienced by individuals when they have endured trauma over a period of time. This has brought about the concept of "complex" traumatic stress disorder. The World Health Organization (2023) published its *11th Version of the Classification of Diseases*, in which it conceptualized "Disorders Specifically Associated with Stress" to summarize the experience of one or a series of traumatic events or adverse experiences. Under this category, it highlights complex post-traumatic stress disorder, which "may develop following exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible." Additionally, it describes adjustment disorder as "a maladaptive reaction to an identifiable psychosocial stressor or multiple stressors that usually emerge within a

month of the stressor.” From both of these concepts, challenges with affective regulation, depressive thoughts, and psychosocial dynamics result.

In this sense, organizational trauma can be described as workplace bullying, a hostile work environment, harassment, and discrimination, all of which help describe the triggers that yield complex post-traumatic stress disorder or adjustment disorder. From a workplace context, research has attempted to explain the phenomenon that comes out of negative workplace experiences or organizational trauma. Work-related stress, also known as occupational stress, has been conceptualized as “the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities, which challenge their ability to cope” (World Health Organization, 2020). Self-determination and psychological safety, as previously described, are also negatively impacted. Other research has attempted to describe the impact on the employee’s ability to produce innovatively in the workplace (Hossin et al., 2022). However, research has yet to holistically conceptualize this phenomenon.

Cultural Implications to Research

For too long, research has not been successful in centering the unique experiences of individuals across different cultures. Psychological concepts, including those pertaining to the workplace, have often collected data from certain demographic groups, which yields limitations to how others experience these phenomena. In 2021, the American Psychological Association acknowledged and took accountability for its role in perpetuating racism and discrimination in psychological research and committed itself to dismantling barriers. With that being said, the authors understand the limitations that seminal research on organizational trauma may have in not being inclusive of cultural indicators.

For some cultures, in the face of distressing experiences, coping mechanisms may not always be apparent to the eye. This may stem from a lack of resources that encourage mental wellness and support. BIPOC populations may often respond to

traumatic situations with resilience, avoidance, and blocking out. In the face of organizational trauma, this may also be an explanation of complex post-traumatic stress disorder or adjustment disorder for BIPOC employees.

Amplifying the experience of organizational trauma from the context of a prolonged occurrence lends value to supporting the development and introduction of “creative suffering” as a conceptual model by applying grounded theory research. This study will introduce the theory of creative suffering and conceptualize the employee experience with creative suffering in the midst of organizational trauma. It will serve as a foundation for future research on identifying, measuring, and addressing creative suffering. It will also center BIPOC employees as an underrepresented population in research to set a basis for amplifying and including the unique experiences of varying employee demographics. The study will be driven by the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do BIPOC professionals explain their experiences with organizational trauma?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do BIPOC professionals explain their experiences with creative suffering in the midst of organizational trauma?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What cultural factors influence how BIPOC professionals navigate their experiences with creative suffering?

Research Question 4 (RQ4): How do BIPOC professionals describe the ideal work environment opposite to one that causes creative suffering?

Research Design

Glaser and Strauss (1970) developed the qualitative grounded theory research methodology to allow researchers to explore and explain a particular phenomenon (Medaugh, 2017). It leverages a systematic, inductive approach incorporating various strategies to analyze data and create meaning (Charmaz, 2010). While grounded theory traditionally emerges when no existing theory can provide context to a

phenomenon, this methodology is also applicable when existing theories are incomplete or do not include certain populations (Creswell, 2007; McGill, 2015).

For this new theory of creative suffering, existing studies speak to some of the factors that emerge from creative suffering; however, limitations exist as they do not identify the psychological and behavioral constructs of creative suffering. Additionally, research is limited in its application to professionals identifying as BIPOC within organizational settings. Phenomenological research was considered an option for understanding employee experiences, but this approach only applies to those phenomena that are known and defined. The authors also considered case study research but deemed it better applied when understanding the elements within a bounded system. While helpful in setting a foundation for qualitative research, these two approaches are limited because they do not inform the development of a new theory or an understudied demographic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). Grounded theory was, therefore, deemed most appropriate in understanding creative suffering as a phenomenon, especially as it results from organizational trauma. The authors applied the grounded theory research design with a multi-methods approach, including an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured focus groups.

Population

The population considered for the study were professionals identifying as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). Given the development of this new theory, the study considered BIPOC professionals across the globe, irrespective of their geographic region. The population also spanned all occupations, educational experience, and professional tenure.

Sample

The authors applied purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants for the study. *Appendix A* lists the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study. While organizational trauma is a variable in the study, it was not used as a criterion for participant inclusion because the study focused more

on the employee's psychological and behavioral responses, which is where creative suffering exists. However, the events that trigger these responses may or may not be perceived by the participant as traumatic. Additionally, the authors understand that cultural influences, experiences, and values influence BIPOC perceptions surrounding traumatization.

Three hundred ninety-eight participants were recruited for the study, and 100 completed the questionnaire. Thirty-four participants expressed interest in the focus group, and 11 participated in a focus group or completed an interview. Participant demographics, listed in *Appendix B*, include gender identification, race/ethnicity, disability identification, LGBTQIA+ identification, professional sector, academic completion, and years of working experience.

Data Collection

The authors leveraged a questionnaire and focus group for data collection. The questionnaire was constructed through Ambivista, a digital survey tool. It included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions asking participants about their experiences with organizational trauma and how that impacted them. Using open-ended responses was deemed appropriate for setting a foundation in grounded theory research. *Appendix C* lists the survey questions.

During the focus group, participants were engaged in a semi-structured interview using the Zoom teleconferencing software about their lived experiences and emotional and behavioral responses to work conditions that led to stress, dissatisfaction, or disengagement. At the end of the session, participants were also given the opportunity to define and characterize creative suffering and an ideal work environment absent of the triggers they had shared. The authors ensured anonymity and confidentiality by removing participant names, photos, or other indicators of their identity. *Appendix D* lists the guiding questions used during the focus group sessions.

Data Analysis Methodology

For the data analysis of the surveys, the authors applied a series of codes to the

open-ended questions according to their alignment with the research questions. Each code was then categorized based on the patterns the authors found. The categories would later inform a thematic analysis to answer the research questions. In the second phase of the analysis, the authors followed a similar process to code the data from the focus groups and aligned them with the categories identified during the first phase of analysis, after which the authors determined they achieved data saturation.

Results

The data analysis produced a series of themes that bring more context and understanding of each research question. They help uncover what would eventually lead to a conceptual model of creative suffering.

RQ1: How do BIPOC professionals explain their experiences with organizational trauma?

BIPOC participants explained their experiences of organizational trauma based on discrimination, macro- and micro-work dynamics, scope of work, and external factors. The codes related to each trigger are listed in *Appendix D*.

Focusing on the internal organizational environment, participants revealed discrimination, microaggressions, and biases that were related to their identity but were not limited to their race or ethnicity. These triggers came in the form of being treated differently from employees identifying with the out-group or microaggressions or stereotypes associated with their identity. For some participants, the organizational trauma stemmed from a lack of representation in their work environment, which led to other experiences, as previously mentioned.

Micro- and macro-work dynamics all constituted the organizational cultures that the participants worked in. From a micro perspective, participants expressed team-level challenges that impact their experience. From a macro perspective, policies and norms embedded in the organization's culture limited group functioning, fostered intimidation, and sought to suppress

them from effectively addressing workplace challenges. Some participants experienced trauma from the duties and responsibilities associated with their roles, which reflected through unrealistic work expectations or unhealthy conditions. Their experience was still associated with macro-work dynamics, based on the organization's failure to improve their work environment.

Synthesizing the three overarching types of organizational trauma, while some participants experienced organizational trauma as a one-time occurrence, others reported that triggers did not occur as an isolated event. The trigger either evolved over time or led to other traumatic experiences. Other participants expressed that while displayed differently, they experienced organizational trauma across multiple environments.

It is important to note that some participants expressed not perceiving some of these experiences as traumatic. This can further lend insight into the cultural implications of how BIPOC professionals process creative suffering amid organizational trauma.

RQ2: How do BIPOC professionals explain their experiences with creative suffering amid organizational trauma?

The data revealed affective, cognitive, behavioral, social, and physical responses to the triggers of organizational trauma. These five themes and their related codes are reflected in *Appendix F*.

Theme 2.1: Affective Responses

Regarding affective responses, participants expressed various feelings and emotions that emerged upon first experiencing the trigger, continued exposure, or a long-term effect. Some participants experienced a sense of shock, bewilderment, or confusion, which yielded a passive response to the trigger. For other participants, they either immediately or eventually experienced feelings of anxiety, fear, or depression as the trigger persisted. Others developed feelings of anger, frustration, and irritation.

Theme 2.2: Cognitive Responses

From a cognitive perspective, participants expressed delayed processing, disengagement, demotivation, and self-doubt in their ability to perform their work. Some participants gained a level of internal motivation and wanted to address the trigger or empower themselves to move beyond the trigger. This is tied to their self-regulation and confidence in actively or passively addressing the trigger. Some participants mentioned that even while they may not be actively exposed to the trigger, their cognitive processing is still impacted to this day.

Theme 2.3: Behavioral Responses

In terms of behavioral responses, there were a variety of implications to the actions that participants took immediately or at a later point in time. Some participants' behavioral responses were with an extent of aggression or passive aggression by returning to the behaviors projected on them. For others, their behavioral responses came in the form of seeking support from colleagues, loved ones, or medical professionals. Other participants noted that they found alternate approaches to channeling their creativity to make their environment more tolerable or bearable. This looked like volunteering on projects and other teams or practicing self-regulation techniques such as mindfulness or prayer to help them navigate their experience. It is important to note that for many participants, the responses to their behaviors determined future behaviors. For some, if they were retaliated against or threatened, which would be a continued trigger, this shifted their behaviors to becoming more passive or active. Additionally, this determined their affective and cognitive responses.

Theme 2.4: Social Responses

The data also indicated social responses in which participants either withdrew from their work environment or found alternative networks to channel their energy. Focus group participants indicated conflict in their personal lives to avoid how they expressed their affective responses to the trigger within the workplace environment.

Theme 2.5: Physical Responses

In the face of organizational trauma, participants expressed declining health conditions. Some experienced weight gain, while others had changes in appetite and hypertension. Participants also expressed that the stress of the trigger inhibited their sleep and caused insomnia.

Some cognitive, affective, and behavioral reflections of the experience with creative suffering were coded as neutral as participants expressed how those looked in negative and positive forms. Self-regulation, for example, was used as a form of prevention but contributed to either a passive or active response to the trigger.

RQ3: What cultural factors influence how BIPOC professionals navigate their experiences with creative suffering?

The data produced seven themes regarding the cultural indicators that informed how BIPOC professionals navigate their experience with creative suffering. While this data primarily emerged from the focus groups, the insights from the survey confirmed the underlying themes. These themes also clarified the affective, cognitive, behavioral, cognitive, social, and physical responses encompassing creative suffering. The codes related to each cultural factor are listed in *Appendix E*.

Theme 3.1: Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality, according to the focus group participants, significantly influenced the participants' passive or active responses based on their faith in a higher power to help them withstand the negative workplace experience or intervene on their behalf. The rigid norms and principles also compelled their compliance without question despite the traumatic situation. Alternatively, faith and spirituality fueled trust that there was a purpose to emerge from their negative experience.

Theme 3.2: Socioeconomics

Socioeconomic reasons inhibited a swift exit from the traumatic space or even self-advocacy, as participants did not want to risk losing the financial security that their jobs provided. Some participants were the

primary breadwinners in their homes or were responsible for dependent family members, while others depended on their steady income to pay off student loan debt. Immigrants on working visas preferred not to speak against the unhealthy environment than risk their residency protections in their host country. These socioeconomic indicators shared by participants are often found within BIPOC communities.

Theme 3.3: Responsibility of Representation

Participants' experiences with creative suffering were influenced by the responsibility of representation, in which there was a level of pressure either by the immediate nucleus or the extended community for participants to represent their family or culture in a positive light. Being in workspaces where they were the "only" of their ethnic or racial group often came with pressure to represent the whole community and suppress their emotions amid their experience.

Theme 3.4: Collectivism

Participants expressed collectivism as a cultural factor that forced them to prioritize the needs of their organization (group) despite the negative experience they faced. This reflected through suppressed emotions to not challenge issues in their organization's culture. One participant battled with the guilt of withholding knowledge because they understood that their cultural values emphasized contributing to the success of the group or organization.

Theme 3.5: Significance of Identity

The expression of creative suffering was often rooted in the significance of identity or the participants' understanding of what it means to be a BIPOC professional. Their resilience, silence, or lack of self-advocacy was a way to avoid stereotypes or stigmatization based on their identity. For some participants, identity came with a sense of purpose and further self-advocacy, understanding the work of their ancestors or similarly identifying individuals who came before them and paved the way for them to coexist in spaces with other racial and ethnic groups.

Theme 3.6: Value of Authority

Participants agreed that their silence or passive response was often informed by the emphasis on respect for those in power. Despite their feelings and experience of creative suffering, participants still understood that they would have to submit to the same leadership that triggered their creative suffering. This also resembled fear of retaliation based on an understanding that those in positions of privilege or power within their organization could cost them their livelihood or reputation if they spoke up.

Theme 3.7: Traumatic Existence

Experiencing organizational trauma, for some participants, triggered strong feelings from other traumatic events either directly or indirectly. For some participants, their experience with organizational trauma triggered traumatic events from their personal lives, which either stemmed from their upbringing or their family situation. For some, it was the challenge of navigating a collective experience of organizational trauma with similarly identifying colleagues. Participants expressed being comforted and knowing that they were alone but also being disheartened that others were suffering the same way they were.

RQ4: How do BIPOC professionals describe the ideal work environment opposite of one that causes creative suffering?

Participants described a work environment different from one that causes creative suffering according to four themes, which are displayed in *Appendix H*. In the presence of this type of environment, participants shared that they would experience a higher sense of fulfillment, confidence, and intrinsic motivation. For some, this type of environment would make them more willing to contribute their knowledge and ideas. They also shared that they would experience better physical and psychological wellness. For some participants, their description was based on the environment they previously worked in, while others described what would have been ideal for them.

Theme 4.1: Fairness and Inclusion

Participants also described an environment with equity and inclusion with ample representation, and equity prevailed across all levels of the organization. They also expressed that in this environment, their contributions were valued by their leaders and colleagues. Additionally, they would feel respected as a professional and a human being.

Theme 4.2: Psychological Safety

Participants expressed that psychological safety is critical for a healthy organizational culture with effective communication and

professional space was expressed as a key component of an environment opposite of triggering creative suffering. Barriers to upward mobility and skills development would be dismantled. Lastly, they would find more alignment between their professional interests and their workplace's mission.

Discussion

The study of the experiences of BIPOC professionals with creative suffering brought about significant insights that help inform BIPOC experiences in the workplace. The

The data demonstrated that even with external factors or traumatic indicators related to an employee's scope of work, the employee experience can quickly become traumatic when the organization's culture is not set up to actively recognize triggers, proactively respond, and protect the employee. Most participants, whether through the survey or the focus group, acknowledged that the events that triggered their experience were directly within the scope of the organization's culture or the systems set in place that enable people to foster toxic work environments.

synergy among its workforce. In this environment, they would be assured that their contributions, creativity, and ideas were welcomed and valued.

Theme 4.3: Leadership Support

Support from leadership at all organizational levels was indicative of championing a supportive work environment. Participants expressed that this was reflected through allyship and sponsorship. Accomplishment was also mentioned by participants in which leadership would take an active role in dismantling the systemic issues that could lead to their experiences with creative suffering.

Theme 4.4: Growth & Development

An environment that empowered participants to learn and grow in their

results also validate that research often fails to consider the intersectionalities that influence employees' experience in the workplace. Whether cultural history, values, or systemic issues, the results confirm the many challenges BIPOC employees face.

Sources of Organizational Trauma

The first key finding from the data analysis was that organizational trauma is not limited to factors outside of the organization's control. The data demonstrated that even with external factors or traumatic indicators related to an employee's scope of work, the employee experience can quickly become traumatic when the organization's culture is not set up to actively recognize triggers, proactively respond, and protect the employee. Most participants, whether

through the survey or the focus group, acknowledged that the events that triggered their experience were directly within the scope of the organization's culture or the systems set in place that enable people to foster toxic work environments. This demonstrates the key factor that organizational trauma can be triggered and fostered by the organization directly. Additionally, while certain factors within the workplace may not begin as traumatic, the culmination of events that stem from the initial trigger can eventually lead to a traumatic experience. Lastly, the results of the data demonstrated that organizational trauma is more aligned with complex post-traumatic stress or social adjustment disorder, given that the events often occur over an extended period or that BIPOC professionals are often subjected to organizational trauma across multiple work environments, whether it be within the same organization or across different places of work.

Conceptualizing Creative Suffering and Creative Thriving

The second key finding helped define the theory of creative suffering and creative thriving. Based on the study findings, creative suffering can be defined as *cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses to events that inhibit an employee's ability to perform at an optimal level*. As the diagram in Appendix I displays, creative suffering can manifest through reactive or responsive functioning. Amid **reactive creative suffering**, the employee's control over their functioning is limited due to organizational trauma. **Responsive creative suffering** is how the employee can effectively process their experience in a way that allows them to focus on what they can control. It may not always indicate a "traumatic experience," given the individual's ability to redirect their energy accordingly. Additionally, responsive creative suffering does not have to be mutually exclusive to reactive creative suffering.

In describing the environment contrary to that which causes creative suffering, participants expressed a sense of fulfillment and the ability to perform at their best. This brings about the term creative thriving, which is defined as the affective, cognitive, and emotional

demonstration of flow when an employee is within an environment conducive to their values, beliefs, career, and professional development goals.

Amplifying the BIPOC Experience

The third key finding is specifically related to the BIPOC experience. It validates studies and findings emphasizing reactions and responses that may not always be considered standard in the workplace. A BIPOC employee's lack of response does not mean they are fulfilled. Neither does it signify positive engagement, motivation, or job satisfaction. Even with their responses indicating a positive work experience in employee surveys, that can still be a demonstration of psychological insecurity, among other factors that inform their choice not to admit to experiencing creative suffering.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study was intended to serve as the foundation of further research on creative suffering; nevertheless, some limitations impacted how the authors could interpret and generalize the findings. Given the fact that the study included participants regardless of their geographic region or locality, a sample survey size of 100 participants may have been too small of a number to generalize BIPOC experiences worldwide. Having 69 percent of respondents being women and most women identifying as Black or African American presented insight on the possible prevalence of how certain demographics are disproportionately impacted by creative suffering. On the other hand, it could also reflect a limitation on the reach of participants of other racial identities. This presents opportunities for further research to zero in on the experiences of subgroups within the BIPOC community inclusive of their intersectionalities. It also makes way for future research to focus on under- or non-represented populations in the data, including those identifying as men, Indigenous, Asian, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, Caucasian, having a disability, or LGBTQIA+.

While the study captured a wide range of professional occupations and industries, there is more to be known about how creative suffering may be reflected within

unique work environments. Case studies can be done to explore the unique factors within the work environment defined by a specific occupation that can lead to creative suffering or creative thriving.

Given that this study served as a theoretical and conceptual foundation for future research, quantitative studies can explore the causation, correlation, or mediation of creative suffering relative to other workplace factors. It provides opportunities for the theory of creative thriving to be further developed with interventions that can help mitigate creative suffering.

Practical Implications

This study illuminates the critical nuances among employees when they experience organizational trauma and the impact it has on them from a mental and physical perspective. Their productivity can significantly decrease, causing creative suffering, whereby they no longer feel the need to be innovative or develop new ideas or solutions, a skill that organizations heavily rely on. In contrast, productivity can also increase as a result of them trying to mask their creative suffering and not give off any indication of helplessness or perceived weakness. Addressing the practical implications of organizational trauma is crucial for an organization's long-term health and success. It requires implementing trauma-informed practices, supporting affected employees, fostering open communication, and prioritizing a healthy and supportive work environment.

This study calls attention to the challenges that lead to decreased engagement, employee wellness, and organizational effectiveness. It validates work surrounding equity, inclusion, and justice that calls for improving organizational cultures for employees from **ALL** backgrounds. Ignoring or mishandling organizational trauma can exacerbate its negative consequences, whereas a proactive and compassionate approach can aid in the healing and rebuilding process for both individuals and the organization. Consultants and practitioners in the organizational development and people management field can utilize these findings to educate and equip their clients and leaders with the tools to

mitigate the factors that contribute to creative suffering. The resulting model provides a sense of awareness of the subtle and obvious signs that can point to creative suffering in the workplace.

Conclusion

This study's exploration into the experiences of BIPOC professionals in the context of organizational trauma yielded significant insights into their experiences with creative suffering. By utilizing survey data, focus group sessions, and interviews, the authors gained a multifaceted understanding of how BIPOC professionals navigate and are impacted by their workplace environments.

The key contribution of this study lies in developing a novel conceptual framework that encapsulates the distinct and shared experiences of BIPOC employees within organizational settings. It recognizes the intricate ways in which these professionals are integrated into their work environments, highlighting the intersectionality of their identities and experiences.

The model of creative suffering is instrumental in identifying and articulating the nuances that often go unnoticed or unaddressed in traditional organizational models. It sheds light on the complex dynamics between disengagement and organizational citizenship—two critical aspects of the workplace experience. Disengagement refers to an employee's detachment or lack of involvement in their work, while organizational citizenship encompasses behaviors that contribute positively to the organizational environment. It provides a deeper understanding of how organizational trauma can manifest in various forms, such as discrimination, marginalization, or lack of representation, which can significantly impact an individual's physical and mental well-being as well as job performance.

Finally, the study's findings emphasize the importance of addressing these issues in organizational policies and practices. It suggests that a deeper understanding of BIPOC experiences can lead to more inclusive and supportive work environments,

enhancing the overall well-being and productivity of BIPOC employees, and ultimately benefiting the organization as a whole.

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Appendix A: Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	18-years or older Identify as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC) Have at least 2 years of experience working for an organization that you do not own or manage Have experienced work environments that caused stress, distress, dissatisfaction, or disengagement, regardless of whether or not it is perceived as organizational trauma
Exclusion Criteria	Younger than 18-years-old Do not identify as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC) Have less than 2 years of work experience Only have experience working for an organization that you own

Appendix B: Participant Demographics

Gender	Male: 30 Female: 70
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian/First Nation People/Alaska Native: 1 Asian: 6 Black/African American: 71 Hispanic/Latino/Spanish: 8 Multiracial: 10 Other: 4
LGBTQIA+ Identification	Yes: 12
Disability Identification	Yes: 19
Industry/Sector	Education: 14 Local/State/Federal government: 18 Healthcare: 12 Non-profit organization: 10 Private sector: 34 Other: 11
Participant Age	18–29: 16 30–49: 71 50–64: 12 65+: 1
Level of Education	Associates Degree/Certificate: 5 Bachelor Degree: 18 Doctoral Degree: 21 High School Diploma or GED: 7 Master's Degree: 48 Trade School Certification: 1
Years of Working Experience	2–5 years: 25 6–12 years: 27 13–20 years: 26 20+ years: 22

Appendix C: Survey Questions

1. Have you ever experienced one or more work-related events, series of events or environment that caused you stress, significant distress, dissatisfaction or disengagement?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. How would you categorize your experience?
 - a. One time occurrence
 - b. Lasting 1–2 years
 - c. Lasting 3–5 years
 - d. Lasting 5–10 years
 - e. Lasting more than 10 years
3. What do you feel triggered the stressful experience(s)?
 - a. An external factor(s)
 - b. My scope of work
 - c. Internal factor(s)
4. Can you specify what that experience was?
5. Did you reach out to anyone about what you were experiencing? Why or why not?
6. How did you deal with the trigger when it first occurred?
7. What feelings did you experience as a result of the trigger?
8. Did anyone approach you regarding their observation of your experience?
9. At what point did you realize you were impacted by the experience?
10. Are you still experiencing the trigger?
 - a. If yes, how have you tried to address the trigger and what was the outcome?
 - b. If no, how did you deal with the trigger and what were the results?
11. How does your experience impact you today?
12. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Prefer not to self-describe
13. Do you identify as LGBTQIA+?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to answer
14. What is your race or ethnicity?
 - a. Asian
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic/Latino, Spanish
 - d. American Indian/First Nation People/Alaska Native
 - e. Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander
 - f. Middle Eastern or North African
 - g. Multiracial
 - h. Other, please specify
15. What is your nationality?
16. Do you identify as having a disability?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
17. What sector do you work in?
 - a. Non-profit organization
 - b. Private sector
 - c. Federal Government
 - d. Education
 - e. Healthcare
 - f. Other, please specify
18. What is your age?
 - a. 18–29
 - b. 30–49
 - c. 50–64
 - d. 65+
19. What is your level of education?
 - a. High School Diploma/GED
 - b. Trade School Certificate
 - c. Associate Degree/Certificate
 - d. Bachelor Degree
 - e. Masters Degree
 - f. Doctoral Degree
20. How many years of work experience do you have working for an organization that you do not own?
 - a. 2–5 years
 - b. 6–12 years
 - c. 13–20 years
 - d. 20+ years

Appendix D: Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. Take us back to the time before the initial experience that caused you stress, distress, disengagement, or dissatisfaction...
 - a. Where were you in terms of your career longevity?
 - b. What were your ambitions, goals, and desires career-wise?
 - c. What were some things you expected from your employer?
 - d. What were some of the positive feelings you experienced, if any?
2. Let's move to the experience(s) that caused stress, distress, dissatisfaction, or disengagement.
 - a. Was this a one-time occurrence, or was it a series of events?
 - b. Did your negative experience occur in one environment or multiple teams or jobs?
 - c. Can you share what that experience was like for you and your initial thoughts/feelings or reactions, if any?
3. Can you share any factors from your cultural, religious, personal, or professional upbringing that you believe may have influenced how you initially processed, responded, or did not respond to the experience?
4. How did your feelings evolve or change over time?
5. Were there similarly identifying individuals (i.e., same race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other identifying characteristics) who advised you on the situation? What was their advice, and how did you navigate that information?
6. Can you describe the specific moment or incident that made you realize you were significantly impacted by the trigger? What were the thoughts and emotions that surfaced during that realization? How did you handle those thoughts and feelings?
7. Let us talk a little more about how the experience has impacted you.
 - a. Can you describe how the experience impacted your creativity, critical thinking, or performance at work?
 - b. How did the experience impact your engagement, motivation, work ethic, or values?
 - c. How did the experience impact your personal or professional relationships?
 - d. Were there behaviors you weren't aware of that people brought up to your attention?
8. Did anyone share your feelings or experiences? If so, can you describe what it felt like knowing that others shared your feelings, experiences, or sentiments?
9. Can you describe your experience witnessing other people being impacted by an unhealthy work environment and how that, in turn, impacted you?
10. If you had negative experiences in multiple environments or workplaces, what were your feelings, reactions, or responses to the repeated triggers?
11. Knowing what you know now, looking back...
 - a. How does your culture, religion/spirituality, or upbringing impact how you view your experience now?
 - b. How does this experience impact your perception, biases, or values?
 - c. Do you perceive this experience as traumatic? Can you help us understand why or why not?
12. Can you describe what it looks like when you are in an environment opposite of the one that caused the stress, distress, or disengagement?
13. Can you share with us what you imagine your feelings, behaviors, attitudes, and social interactions would be like in that perfect world?
14. We will give you two terms. The first term is "creative suffering." The second term is "creative thriving." How would you define "creative suffering" versus "creative thriving," and what three characteristics would you use to describe each?

Appendix E: Organizational Trauma Summary of Codes

Category of OT	Type of Trigger	Negative Codes
Marginalization	Discrimination	Ageism; Toxic masculinity; Sexism/Gender discrimination; Intellectual Discrimination; Racial Slur; Racism; Religious Discrimination; Pay inequity; Micro/macro-aggressions; Stereotypes
	Diversity Challenges	Severe underrepresentation; Exclusion
Micro-/Macro- Work Dynamics	Harassment	Bullying; Micromanaging; Constructive discharge; Sexual harassment; Intimidation; Humiliation; Retaliation; Hostile work environment; Gaslighting
	Organizational Culture	Toxic work environment; Values Misalignment; Dysfunctional operations; Dysfunctional team dynamics; Lack of upward mobility; Lack of employee support; Lack of organizational justice; Non-compliance; Poor change management; Crossing boundaries; Work-life imbalance; Favoritism; Nepotism
	Poor Leadership	Abuse of power; Lack of leadership support; Verbal abuse; Pseudo-leadership; Management practices; Lack of autonomy
External	External	Customer Aggressions
Scope of Work	Scope of Work	Unrealistic workload Minimal breaks Divergence from job duties Emphasis on quantity of work, not quality

Appendix F: Creative Suffering Summary of Codes

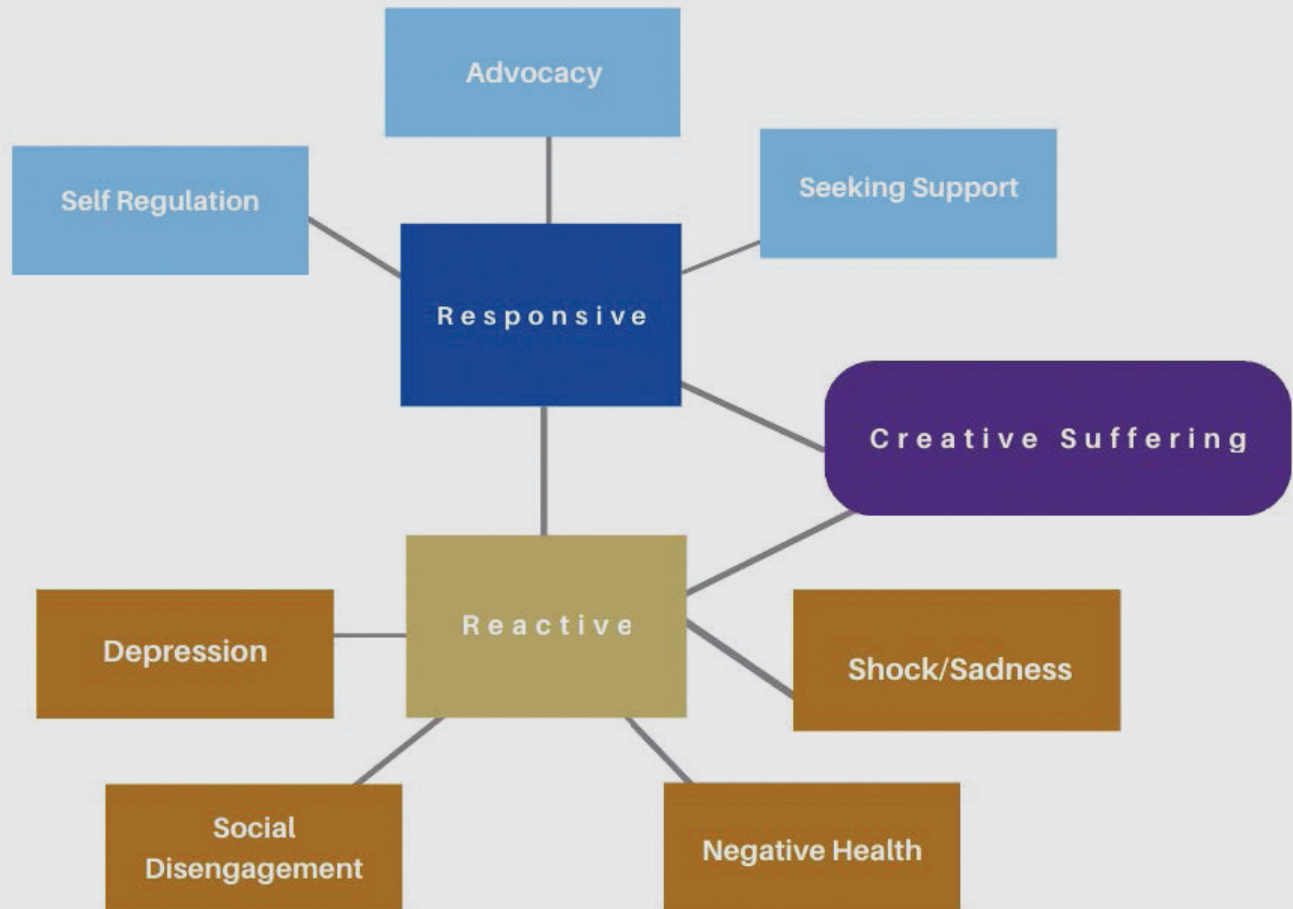
Response Type	Negative Codes	Neutral Codes	Positive Codes
Affective	Anger; Belittlement; Betrayal; Despise; Disappointment; Disrespected; Distressed; Embarrassment; Exclusion; Guilt; Insecurity; Irritation; Loneliness; Sadness; Shock; Unsupported; Victimized	Self-Regulation; Numbness	
Cognitive	Absentmindedness; Accomodation; Awareness; Caution; Confusion; Defeated; Delayed processing; Demotivation; Denial; Depression; Distress; Distrust; Dread; Fear: Guilt; Hypersensitivity; Insecurity; Overwhelmed; Distress; Passive Response; Projecting; Self-Regulation; Suppression; Withdrawal; Bias Development	Rationalization; Self-regulation	Empowerment; Hopeful; Humour; Self-regulation
Behavioral	Absence; Accommodation; Confrontation; Defensive; Denial; Disengaged; Distressed; Guarded; Guilt; Minimal contribution; Panic; Passive aggression; Passive response; Projecting; Resignation; Resistance; Self-coping; Self-degradation; Separation; Short-tempered; Suppression; Unproductive; Trauma bonding; Vindication; Withdrawal; Withholding	Assertiveness; Independence; Passive Response; Resignation; Resilience; Self-regulation	Advocacy; Documentation; Empowerment; Entrepreneurship; Medical Support; Prayer; Redirection; Resignation; Schedule Adjustment; Seeking Support; Self-coping
Social	Guarded; Withdrawal; Passive aggression; Personal relationships; Private life; Vindication; Withdrawal		Seeking support; Seeking counsel
Physical	Appetite changes; Exhaustion; Hypertension; Insomnia		

Appendix G:: Cultural Factors Summary of Codes

Cultural Factor	Associated Codes
Religion & Spirituality	Faith for divine intervention; Prayers for strength; Turning the other cheek; Divine validation
Socioeconomics	Being the primary breadwinner; Residency for VISA holders; Being a single parent
Responsibility of Representation	Dependence of the community; Making the family unit/community proud
Collectivism	Prioritizing others' needs
Significance of Identity	Angry Black woman; Being the “only”; Radical acceptance of identity; Ancestry; Stigmas and stereotypes; Resilience; Avoidance
Value of Authority	High power distance; Tolerating abuse from leadership
Traumatic Existence	Collective trauma; Traumatic home experience; Traumatic childhood

Appendix H: Summary of an Environment Opposite of that Causing Creative Suffering

Category	Related Codes
Fairness & Inclusion	Equity, Inclusion, Fairness, Representation, Feeling Valued, Feeling Appreciated, Respect
Psychological Safety	Values Alignment, Synergy, Harmony, Communication, Transparency, Receptive, Welcoming Ideas, Creative Ability, Fostering Imagination
Leadership Support	Allyship, Accomplishment, Champions, Sponsorship
Growth & Development	Professional Development, Advancement, Skills Alignment



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Dr. Modeste holds a PhD in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from Capella University. She has co-authored a SIOP (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology) White Paper, as well as a host of other published articles in many other journals. Dr. Modeste is an adjunct professor at Purdue Global University and National University, where she teaches in the School of Behavioral and Social Sciences to undergraduate and doctoral-level students. She can be reached at rmodeste@vestigia-os.com

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In her experience, she has lead the development of competency models and assessments to support employee learning and development across the federal government. She collaborates with cross-functional groups to leverage research and evidence-based and data-driven strategies to increase employee engagement, decrease turnover, and foster diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (DEIAB).

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Given her experiences, she is intentional about being an agent of motivation, inspiration, and encouragement to the world around her. She can be reached at jnelson@junuri.co.

“Our emerging transdisciplinary exploration of the impact of sudden and unexpected change at work has revealed that for some, the experience results in symptoms commonly associated with physical whiplash.”

Workplace Whiplash

A Transdisciplinary Approach to Trauma Caused by Sudden or Unexpected Change at Work

By Tomaso Cairoli and
Paul Taylor-Pitt

Abstract

Organizations are sleeping on a self-inflicted time bomb of trauma. In times of turbulence, the need for agility is widely acknowledged; however, the impact of sudden and unexpected change on employees is frequently disregarded or addressed with minimal attention and effectiveness. Individuals subjected to sudden change undergo a range of psychological and physical effects similar to those resulting from a car crash. Adopting a transdisciplinary approach, collaboration between an Osteopath and an Organization Development Practitioner labels this phenomenon as “Workplace Whiplash,” serving as a generative image to prompt a shift in perception regarding discussions on organizational trauma. Workplace Whiplash constitutes a concealed organizational epidemic leading to diminished productivity, heightened costs, and unhealthy cultures. Organizational Development Practitioners should adopt a more trauma-informed and somatic approach to consulting, fostering awareness of the unintended consequences of change with leaders and encouraging further exploration into methods for mitigating and even preventing the trauma associated with the growing demand for agility.

Keywords: workplace whiplash; organizational trauma; embodied intelligence; transdisciplinary approach; osteopathy; somatic OD; sudden change.

In an increasingly unpredictable world, the concept of organizational agility—the capacity for workplaces to respond quickly to external and internal change—has emerged as a framework for navigating and surviving the challenges of operating in a climate of complexity. Agility is the capability to act in response to sudden, rapid, and unexpected phenomena such as restructuring, downsizing and re-culturing. The impact of these events on employee wellbeing, safety and security has been described as traumatic, leading to absenteeism, conflict and accidents. Despite the need for agility, it can be experienced by employees as a sudden and unexpected change. This change can cause trauma which, as our emerging work shows, can have a similar effect to being in a car crash.

The exploration of organizational trauma is gathering pace. To date, work has focused predominantly on how it affects individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole through a conceptual, cognitive lens demonstrating that it can manifest as diminished productivity, heightened absenteeism, and elevated turnover rates (Fallot & Harris, 2015). It is also acknowledged that trauma can contribute to a toxic workplace culture, fostering increased conflicts and even instances of workplace violence. Little attention has been offered to re-framing organizational trauma through an embodied lens, inquiring into the physical, somatic effects of change.

Physical trauma is any form of bodily damage, including an accident or impact injury. Injuries can be caused by an impact

on the body from a car accident, fall or blow to the head. One of the most common results of this impact is whiplash. Whiplash is a complex neck injury caused by forceful, rapid back-and-forth movement of the head (Tanaka et al, 2018). Whiplash can cause function loss, pain, weakness, anxiety, sleep disturbance and PTSD up to 12 months after the onset. It may often rectify itself over time but, left untreated, it can cause spinal misalignment and chronic, long-term pain (Koumantakis, 2021). Whiplash associated disorders can be treated by physical interventions such as Osteopathy.

Osteopaths detect, treat and prevent health problems in patients by combining manual techniques, movement and advice aimed at restoring body functions and reducing the experience of painful symptoms (Fryer, 2017a). They take a holistic view of their patients in relation to their surrounding environment and habits, working towards improving their well-being through an in-depth understanding of muscles, joints, connective tissue and body systems. Their work can enhance mobility and promote faster healing while reducing pain and tensions that can affect day to day life. Therefore, an osteopath's scope of practice can be seen as collaboration of different manual techniques, exercises, health advice with the aim to restore or improve the patient's function and well-being. Osteopaths take a systems approach to working with clients. Osteopathy is based on the principle that the wellbeing of an individual depends on their bones, muscles, ligaments and connective tissue functioning smoothly together.

Whiplash is a Workplace Issue

Osteopaths see a high proportion of physical whiplash in their caseloads. Traumatic cervical syndrome, including whiplash injuries, results from neck trauma and affects the cervical spine and nervous system (Letzel, Angst & Weigl, 2019). It causes various symptoms related to the motor and nervous systems, as well as mental, neurological, and balance issues. Common symptoms include neck pain and headaches, but patients can also experience

dizziness, nausea and memory loss (Higgins et al, 2020). While most people recover within three months, some develop chronic symptoms, leading to significant social and economic challenges such as medical care, disability, and lost productivity. Neck pain caused by whiplash is a widespread issue causing work disabilities for many individuals, with up to 50% experiencing it for about a year (Kazeminasab et al, 2022).

Managing neck pain effectively requires a holistic approach known as the biopsychosocial model. This model takes into account not only the physical aspects of pain but also the psychological and social influences. Addressing psychosocial factors, such as providing education and therapy, has been proven to significantly improve attitudes and reduce disability. Osteopaths take work related issues into account when diagnosing and treating whiplash. Organizational Development Practitioners could learn a great deal from this approach, as the cost of whiplash to the UK economy alone is significant, approaching £20 billion annually according to the Health and Safety Executive. This includes direct costs, such as medical treatment, legal fees, and insurance premiums, as well as indirect costs, such as lost productivity and absence from work (HSE, 2023).

Sharing Experience Across Professional Boundaries

On the surface, Osteopaths and Organizational Development Practitioners may seem to have little in common. However, we both work with people experiencing trauma in our practice. The symptoms our respective clients experience after trauma, whether physical or emotional, are extremely similar, even though these traumas happen in different situations with very different causes. In this paper, the authors—one an Organization Development Practitioner and the other an Osteopath—combine our expertise to bring a new lens through which we can explore organizational trauma that comes as an unintended consequence of the need for organizations to be agile: the impact of sudden and unexpected change.

Organization Development Practitioners, applying behavioural science to workplace issues, operate in the cognitive space. Our work is diagnostic, using tools and instruments to identify areas of concern; dialogic, creating spaces for conversation; and dynamic, experimenting in the immediate environment using techniques such as coaching and group interventions. As OD professionals we rarely venture into the realm of the somatic, embodied experiences of our clients.

An Invitation for OD Practitioners to Go Beyond the Cognitive

OD is concerned with three key areas of work: organizational health, organizational performance and the management of change. These areas need intentional effort from leaders with the help of behavioural scientists (Cheung Judge, 2014) which is seen as a key role of OD practitioners. High up the list of priorities for the field, like that of management consulting, is how to help organizations manage and live with change (Walumbwa, 1999). One of the differences that sets OD apart from traditional consulting is by maintaining a focus on its core values, founding principles and ideals (Schull, Church & Warner Burke, 2013) while keeping an eye on organizational success. However, the dichotomies of values versus business and performance versus health can create a tension for OD Practitioners and organizations alike.

Our theories and our identity have been constantly shifting (Ray & Goppelt, 2013) but may not have kept up with the pace of change in the world. As organizations and systems become more agile and complex and, as such, are incapable of being predicted (Lewis, 1994) perhaps we need to move away from traditional practices where OD is defined as an intentionally designed program of change initiatives (McCord & Franetovic, 2014).

Research by this author states that to remain relevant in the future, OD practitioners should work on self as an instrument of change in order to go deeper under the surface and further into the complexity of human system issues. Values and ethics should be at the heart of our work,

combining our experience and training into a depth and breadth of abilities (Taylor-Pitt et al, 2018).

One way of OD practitioners going deeper and further into human systems is to embrace embodied awareness into our OD practice. The link between cognitive and embodied intelligence is growing as a field of inquiry. Cognition is embodied (Sanches De Oliveira, 2023), suggesting connections between conceptual knowing and embodied wisdom (Weber, 2018). Integrating cognitive and embodied intelligence has been suggested (Szelwach & Matthews, 2023) as an important evolution of OD practice for the future, integrating Thinking (Head), Feeling (Heart), Doing (Hands), and Being (Whole Body). The integration of embodied and cognitive thinking that sparked the idea for this paper came from a conversation between an OD Practitioner and an Osteopath.

The Emerging Frame of Workplace Whiplash

Our emerging transdisciplinary exploration of the impact of sudden and unexpected change at work has revealed that for some, the experience results in symptoms commonly associated with physical whiplash. We have called this phenomenon Workplace Whiplash, a generative image encouraging an emergence of novelty (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) that can lead to new courses of action. Generative images are conceptualised as an invitation to see anew so that we may overcome areas of rigidity (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990) by stimulating new organizational conversations and narratives (Marshak, 2015). Workplace Whiplash as an image is imbued with high generative capacity (Cooperrider & Zandee, 2008) and as such can be used as an enabler of transformation. Generative imagery and metaphor can be used to re-frame and accelerate action in organizations. Using this approach as a sense making device helps to refocus the familiar and show it in new light. Workplace Whiplash connotes meaning on a cognitive, emotional and physical level in a holistic way (Sackmann, 1989) that may help to

trigger a perceptual shift in how we discuss Organizational Trauma.

By presenting our early work in this space, we invite further, deeper investigation into this concept which has the potential to improve not only the health and wellbeing of employees, but to save organizations financial and reputational damage. It has been recognised that physical whiplash caused by accidents poses big problems for individuals, companies, and society. We posit that Workplace Whiplash is a hidden epidemic causing deep seated problems and is so far largely ignored in organizations.

Testing our Hypothesis

As part of our exploration of this topic, we invited people to share their stories of sudden or unexpected change at work. An open invitation was shared through LinkedIn, X (formerly known as Twitter) and word of mouth. Participants contributed through an online survey and had the option of anonymity. Twenty people contributed to our inquiry. Each person was asked to describe the situation they had been through, the impact it had on them and any physical, emotional or psychological symptoms they experienced as a result. Participants were invited to share the effects of this change on their life in and outside of work as well as to rate the support offered by their organization.

All twenty of the participants were based in the UK, which is most likely due to the physical location of the authors and our networks. This does, however, invite further investigation beyond the UK to determine if this phenomena goes beyond our geographical borders. Participants' roles at the time of the sudden or unexpected change ranged in remit and seniority from student and baker to OD Manager and Executive Director. They represented a diverse sample of organizational sectors including healthcare, manufacturing and the performing arts.

A Mixed-methods study was designed to gather the data and take an interpretative analysis approach to find and make meaning. Primary data was collected through qualitative, dialogic conversations helping

us to inform the territory, task and question for our inquiry. Secondary data was collected through qualitative analysis of previously published papers on organizational trauma; treatment of physical trauma; evidence based approaches to treating physical whiplash; embodiment and somatic OD. Further gaps in the literature were consequently identified.

Primary data, both qualitative and quantitative, was collected using a designed survey. These were compared with secondary data from similar fields of inquiry. Convenience Sampling was adopted as the framework for data collection.

This approach lends itself to new, emerging fields of discovery providing fast and simple access to those who are near us. Our participants were self-selecting, sourced from in-person and online conversations on major social media. Some of the selected people voluntarily shared our invitation within their own networks, increasing the range of available participants.

There are limitations of both Convenience Sampling and a small, fast survey, therefore there is potential for future research, such as broadening the sample size or using other methods to test the findings for wider generalizability. We included professionals aged 18+, of different professions, roles and positions, which gave both a breadth of respondents but reduced the opportunity to be specific to a particular field, i.e., senior leaders. For further exploration, we would aim to collaborate with a sample of the population big enough to be generalized, as well as with more sector or role specific samples.

We acknowledge the inherent biases of transdisciplinary work. On the other hand this approach broadens our view and understanding of the topic, making it more than just the sum of two different hypotheses (or assumptions or viewpoints). We therefore recognize that inviting others practitioners from outside our scope of practice would also enhance the quality of our project.

Sudden and Unexpected Change

The type of sudden or unexpected organizational change included restructuring,

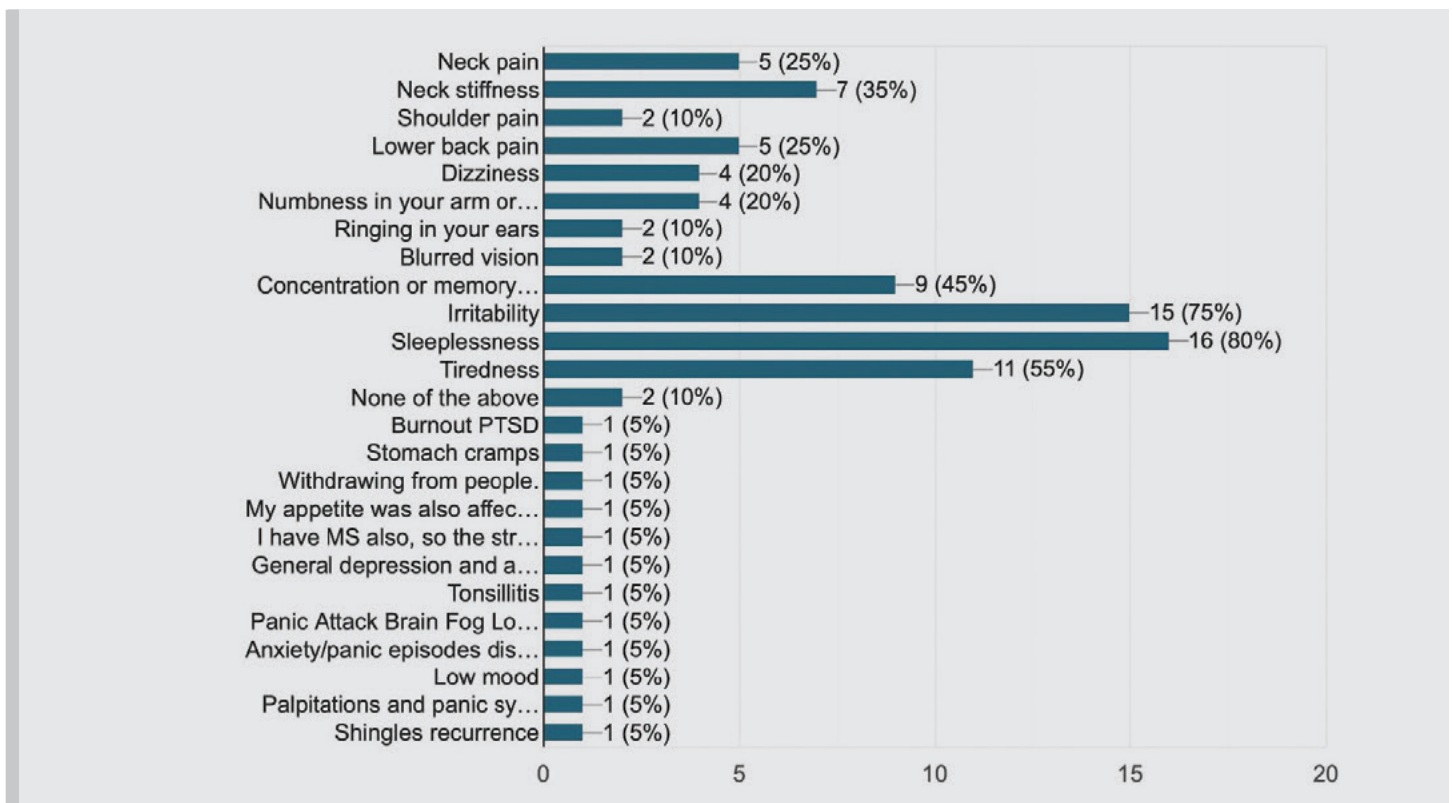


Figure 1. Impact of Sudden and Unexpected Change.

redundancy and change of organizational direction. There were a number of repeating themes in the stories. Covid-19 was mentioned by several participants, showing that the pandemic had impacted in different ways including full closure, reorganization and changes in work dynamics. Organizational Restructures were a common theme, often accompanied by role changes, new reporting arrangements and in some cases redundancies. Redundancy and exiting the organization were frequent occurrences, presenting huge challenges for the individuals concerned. Reports of little communication and emotional support from management were themes where redundancies took place.

Several participants were involved in changes in management or leadership, which led to confusion and a lack of clear communication in terms of job security and clarity on performance expectations. Organizational change as a result of financial challenges were mentioned as a theme, including pay cuts, funding challenges and uncertainty about budget allocations. This often resulted in a fear of job loss, particularly during a probationary period or due to the unexpected change in

the organization's situation. Some participants reported feeling overwhelmed and a sense of pressure to prove their worth or indispensability to the organization which led to increased stress. Other experiences mentioned by participants included a cyber-attack and having to exit an organization after raising concerns about leadership practices.

Physical Impact of Sudden and Unexpected Change

Participants were invited to share the impact that the change had on them, both through a qualitative description and through selecting a pre-chosen set of physical and emotional symptoms. Sleeplessness or insomnia was the most commonly reported symptom (16 out of 20 respondents) along with irritability (15/20) and tiredness (11). Almost half of the respondents mentioned difficulties with concentration and memory, which could indicate cognitive stress related to the changes. Just over one third of respondents (7) experienced neck stiffness, with one quarter (5) reporting both neck and lower back pain. In addition to the listed symptoms, participants reported impacts including loss

of confidence, reduced appetite, PTSD, panic and anxiety and conditions such as Shingles, Multiple Sclerosis and Tonsillitis. Fatigue or tiredness was another commonly mentioned symptom, indicating that organizational change contributed to physical and mental exhaustion. The impacts are illustrated in Figure 1.

Personal Impact of Sudden and Unexpected Change

From qualitative responses on the impact of sudden and unexpected workplace change, we can classify it as a multifaceted experience, as reported in the personal accounts of participants. One individual reflected on a significant decline in their work performance due to prolonged administrative tasks, resulting in physical health deterioration. Another recounts feeling unwell and ultimately stepping away from their executive role. Serious physical issues, such as back problems and reliance on medication, are mentioned as consequences. Mental strain was a common thread, with individuals feeling drained, unheard, and doubting their self-worth. The pervasive sense of fear, lack of control, and uncertainty about job

How would you rate the support your organisation provided?

20 responses

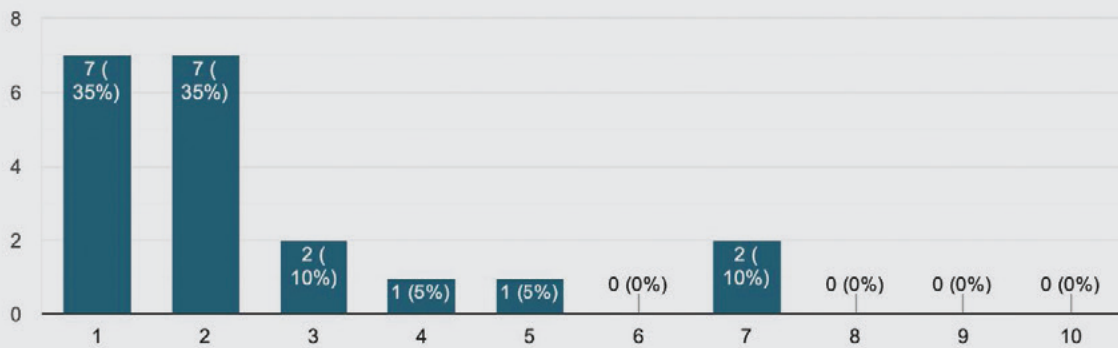


Figure 2. Rating Organizational Support

security contributed to a sense of destabilizing anxiety. We heard examples of how pregnancy-related issues were mishandled, causing significant distress. Panic attacks, emotional swings, and loss of confidence were prevalent in the respondents. Physical symptoms like fatigue, brain fog, stomach cramps, and sleep disturbances were reported, impacting work performance. The experiences also showed a range of responses, from shock and betrayal to anger, despair, and anxiety, underscoring the profound toll of sudden workplace changes on individuals' well-being.

Support Offered as a Result of Sudden and Unexpected Change

Participants were invited to rate their organization's support offered on a scale of 1 (Nothing was offered, or what was offered was not helpful) to 10 (I got exactly what I needed). The results are shown in Figure 2.

Several of the participants described emotional distress and frustration over how they were treated during these times of sudden change and uncertainty. Poor communication and lack of transparency from management were evident in many responses. The majority of respondents rated the support offered by their organizations as relatively low. The highest rating given was a 7 which indicates moderately positive support but still below the top tier. The lowest ratings were 1 which indicated poor or no support. Several respondents gave this lowest rating. Ratings between 2 and 4 were common, signifying low to moderate levels of support. The

data suggests that a significant portion of respondents were dissatisfied with the support provided by their organizations during times of change or difficulty. A substantial number of respondents rated the support as "poor" or "none." While there was some variability in the ratings, with a few respondents providing higher scores.

Wider Impact of Sudden and Unexpected Change

Beyond the individual impact, organizations risk more lasting, systemic and reputational damage by not attending to sudden or unexpected change in a more pro-active way. The emotional toll and stress caused by sudden changes can have a negative impact on productivity. Employees who are anxious, overwhelmed, or demotivated may struggle to perform at their best. The emotional responses could affect relationships with colleagues as anger, panic, and stress can lead to strained interactions or decreased collaboration. The impact on self-esteem should be a concern for organizations. Feelings of worthlessness, self-doubt, and betrayal can erode an individual's confidence and self-image, leading to reduced performance. Toxic cultures and poor communication mentioned in some responses can have lasting effects on an organization's culture, making it challenging for employees to thrive.

Recommendations for Further Work

Although a small initial sample size, the data shows that organizational trauma

caused by sudden and unexpected change can result in symptoms similar to physical whiplash. For organizations and OD Practitioners this opens opportunities for conversations with our clients where we might bring this to their attention with the hope of preventing further incidences of trauma. The data highlights several key issues we may want to explore:

Communication and transparency

What improvements to communication and transparency might be useful for organizations to address? If it's not possible to be more open about the coming change, or it happens unexpectedly, making it impossible for everyone to be transparent about everything, there could be more transparency around the impact of change. If leaders of an organization were to say, "We know this is tough. Change can be hard on people. In fact, there's some work being done to explore the connection between organizational change and the symptoms of physical whiplash. We know that change can be traumatic, and we want to be better at supporting our people so we're being honest about the possible impact and what we are doing to prepare for and maybe even prevent you going through unnecessary pain." OD Practitioners as trusted advisors to the business are well placed to coach and support leaders to be more comfortable in discussing the potentially negative impacts of Workplace Whiplash.

Employee Assistance Programmes

The participants' responses showed that there is significant room for improvement

in the way organizations support their employees in times of unexpected or sudden change. Low ratings on organizational support can have negative implications for employee morale, productivity, and overall well-being. Organizations should take this feedback seriously and consider taking action to improve support structures. Organizations often engage Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to assist employees experiencing psychological distress, yet EAPs primarily focus on individual remedies rather than addressing the context of the problem (Bouzikos et al, 2022). Employee assistance programs (EAPs) seem to be a workplace panacea (Joseph & Walker, 2017) without a firm basis in an evidence base and researchers of traditional EAPs have called for providers and commissioners to be more robust in the empirical assessment of the effectiveness of its services. A proposed framework for evaluation (Hsu, Lan & Wang, 2020) measures the impact of EAPs on absenteeism, presenteeism, work engagement, life satisfaction, and workplace distress but does not include any of the physical effects we have identified around Workplace Whiplash.

This is an area for further investigation. EAPs that include mental health resources, counselling services and access to manual therapies such as osteopathy, physiotherapy and other somatic support in order to process physical and mental health issues could contribute to lessening the impact of Workplace Whiplash.

Possible Opportunities for OD Practitioners

Organizations have made progress in prioritising employee well-being and mental health as a strategic initiative, recognizing that a healthier and more supported workforce is likely to be more productive and engaged. Our work suggests it would be beneficial to both employers and employees to include a focus on physical well-being, taking a proactive stance so that preparations for sudden or unexpected change can be put in place that mitigate the risk of symptoms of Workplace Whiplash.

OD practitioners are well placed to support organizations to support their staff

more effectively in times of sudden and unexpected change. We have the opportunity to work with organizations who wish to proactively address the symptoms reported by employees in our emergent work. Workplace culture contributes to these symptoms, meaning we can work with organizations to take steps to shaping their cultures to be more supportive and respectful. Regular honest and open check-ins between managers and employees can be used to check-in on their physical and emotional well-being, as well as providing a platform for discussing concerns. Managers can act as a conduit between their direct reports and those more senior in the organization to ensure an ongoing flow of information that can be acted on. OD practitioners can work with client systems to raise awareness of these issues and provide tailored support in the development of supportive organizational cultures.

Being Trauma Informed

There are professions who have recognized the need to attend to trauma (Sweeney et al, 2016— therapists and coaches are becoming more ‘trauma informed,’ that is having an understanding of the far-reaching effects of trauma and creating a safe and supportive container for their clients (Fallot & Harris, 2015). Organizations however have much work to do in order to become more trauma informed. Guidance on how organizations can be trauma informed is a very recent addition to our collective knowledge. Work done by the Lancashire Violence Reduction Network (2023) advocates the use of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s 4R framework.

Realization: All people at all levels of the organization or system have a basic realization about trauma and understand how trauma can affect families, groups, organizations, and communities as well as individuals.

Respond: Staff in every part of the organization, from the person who greets clients at the door to the executives and the governance board, have changed their language, behaviours and policies to take into consideration the experiences of trauma.

SAMPLING OF QUALITATIVE RESPONSES FROM PARTICIPANTS

“Some days I am working at 25% capacity. My performance has suffered, mainly as it takes a lot longer, now on the majority of days, to complete administrative tasks. I was already living with chronic pain conditions so my physical health has deteriorated as my burnout increases. It’s fluid and nuanced rather than static and simple.”

“Felt generally unwell, sluggish, tired, unfit. Ultimately decided to step away from my Executive role.”

“I began to suffer with serious back issues which resulted in a large amount of pain and medication which I am still having to take.”

“I felt mentally drained. My work was questioned but there was no listening to the answers. I was constantly tired, emotional and began doubting my self worth.”

“Will the organisation survive? Will I have a job? Fear. The lack of control or agency was destabilising. Anxiety interspersed with periods of complete calm.”

“I was told when I was very early pregnant that I was at risk of redundancy. The whole process was not followed correctly and I’ve been left in a completely difficult position.”

“I had a panic attack when I was told out of the blue and then spiralled. Mental Health was poor for several weeks.”

“I swing between feeling fairly well physically and emotionally neutral to being angry, exhausted physically emotionally and psychologically.”

“Panic, worry, embarrassment, confusion, hurried sense to find a new job, loss of friends.”

“The fatigue and brain fog were the worst as these made my confidence and self esteem fall even further, and made it harder to problem-solve and be adaptable.”

“Overworked, overwhelmed.”

SAMPLING OF QUALITATIVE RESPONSES FROM PARTICIPANTS

“Shock, betrayal, demotion with subsequent dent in confidence, lowered resilience, low mood, increased anxiety.”

“I was unable to sleep and was so tired which lead to being unable to concentrate at work. I became emotional at the smallest thing and felt I was unable to complete work or tasks as quickly as before. Stress manifested as intense stomach cramps and upset tummy.”

“There was very little work performance in the immediate aftermath. Minimal communication. A bit of a daze. It was survival mode, doing the basics required to get by... eat, sleep, check in on colleagues. Same with family... I'd have struggled to write a shopping list in the first couple of days. I was in Washington DC on 9/11 and other than the horror associated with that day, my physical and emotional response was similar. I got take-out food as cooking was too complicated... my brain took time to process and I was very tired.”

“I lost around half a stone in weight. The sleeplessness impacted my work life, as I was tired so struggled to concentrate / deliver good work. Friends and family noted that I was visibly stress, and less coherent.”

“Stress, anger, anxiety, despair.”

“Sadness, however, at the time I was more concerned about the well-being of others and whether they would get paid or find other jobs.”

“Despite this feeling of emotional and physical exhaustion, I went into overdrive with other areas of my life. Busy, busy, busy “doing”. I know some people have a view that I am sitting at home watching daytime TV as I'm unemployed. I also retreated a little into myself and don't have a very positive view of life. It has definitely knocked my confidence. The first interview I had after this experience was for a (more junior) post and I didn't get it.”

“Not valued. Not needed. Worthless.”

Recognition: People in the organization or system are also able to recognize the signs of trauma.

Resist Retraumatization: Staff who work within a trauma-informed environment are taught to recognize how organizational practices may trigger painful memories and retraumatize clients with trauma histories.

As OD Professionals we can become more trauma-informed in our practice, helping us to take a humanistic, compassionate view on sudden or unexpected change. Our knowledge that organizational change and Workplace Whiplash can have severe consequences on employees' lives is bolstered by the new data we have generated that reinforces the importance of creating a healthy work environment, providing access to support. By developing our competency in trauma-informed practice, we can add another dimension to our understanding of how we might take proactive measures to address these issues. We should include this new learning in our bank of professional knowledge.

Conclusion

Workplace Whiplash, caused by sudden changes at work, can hit employees like a car crash. Our transdisciplinary approach offers a fresh take on organizational trauma. Instead of expecting individuals to tough it out after sudden changes, we suggest OD practitioners collaborate with organizations to be more open, proactive, and supportive during such shifts. Organizations, sometimes unintentionally, harm their employees in the name of agility. These workplace surprises can inflict physical and psychological trauma akin to a physical trauma. By raising awareness of, and attending to, Workplace Whiplash organizations can save money, support employees better, and reduce the costs of decreased productivity and injuries. This opens doors for OD practitioners to reshape how they work with organizations in a more holistic, embodied way. We welcome other professions to join our evolving framework to expand how OD practitioners tackle organizational trauma.

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“Considering the tapering survival rate of family-owned businesses as they are passed down through generations, efforts to prepare the new generation for leadership would significantly help families better ensure the survival of their legacy for generations to come.”

Combatting Organizational Trauma in Family-Owned Businesses

By Adam Ben-Hanania

Abstract:

This article explores the concept of organizational trauma within the context of family-owned businesses. Drawing on the evolutionary nature of humans as storytellers, the paper emphasizes how systemic experiences of trauma can impact individual and collective well-being, organizational functionality, and even pose risks to the economy. With a looming, nationwide generational shift in leadership due to an aging population, the paper underscores the importance of succession planning and leadership development to mitigate the potential for organizational trauma and failure of family-owned businesses. Constituting a significant portion of the economy, their failure would have a poignant impact on the individual and societal level. This paper advocates for a systematic approach to prepare new leaders, emphasizing the need for resilience in the face of organizational trauma. A model is proposed, illustrating the interplay between organizational trauma, succession planning, leadership, and organizational resilience, providing insights for practitioners and business owners.

Keywords: organizational trauma, family-owned business, leadership transition, succession planning, organizational resilience, effective leadership, systemic change

Introduction

We are evolutionary storytellers, communicating and bonding over narratives which help us create meaning (Saad, 2013). What happens when a whole organization bonds over a traumatic narrative? Further, what if that narrative is lived and breathed on a daily basis while that individual is expected to perform on a high level? The stakes are high—either keep performing or risk the security to maintain a way of life, to support dependents, to provide shelter, food, clothing, and so much more. A dissonance at work between that which provides security on one level but feels so wrong on another consumes and demotivates us, affecting our minds, our cognition, our

behavior, and our ways of interacting with others (Lindsay, 2020; Hormann, 2007).

The collective becomes destabilized, causing uncertainty and harm, leading to a dysfunctional organization unable to perform effectively; the organization becomes helpless and paralyzed, mirroring the individuals it comprises. This is organizational traumatization. A pervasive phenomenon brought on by sudden or cumulative events, internal or external, organizational trauma adversely affects our individual identity, cognition, perceptions, interactions with others, and performance (Hormann & Vivian, 2005; Hormann, 2007; Lindsay, 2020; Steinkamp, 2014; Jacobsen 2012). Widely spread, these effects result in reduced employee well-being, loss of talent,

stifled innovation and productivity, a damaged company reputation, and dire financial consequences.

While larger corporations may be able to withstand these effects for a longer amount of time, smaller companies such as family-owned businesses will face more dire consequences, with a greater risk of death. According to the US Census Bureau (2022), small businesses, otherwise known as mom and pop businesses, are defined as having fewer than 500 employees (Grundy & Alston, 2022). Regardless of their scale, family-owned businesses form an integral part of the nation's fabric. Van Der Vliet (2021) shows family businesses to be a major pillar of the US economy as they employ nearly 60% of the workforce, make up 54% of the GDP, and amount to about 32 million businesses in the country. The failure of family-owned businesses due to organizational trauma can lead to significant adverse effects on the economy. Apart from the fact that family-owned businesses make up a majority of the economy, the population is aging. Over 20 million baby boomers retired in 2020 and an average of 2 million baby boomers are retiring annually (McFadden, 2022). This means widespread shifts in leadership are imminent. Based on research indicating that leadership disruptions can lead to organizational trauma, the impending, nationwide changes in leadership within family-owned businesses warrants careful consideration and thorough preparation (Lindsay, 2020). As previously mentioned, if this process is not handled properly, there stands to be a great risk to the economy. Therefore, successors from younger generations assuming control over their family-businesses should undergo thorough training and systematic development to ensure they lead their inherited companies effectively. A succession plan encompassing leadership development training would foster organizational resilience in the face of change and mitigate the potential for organizational trauma.

Salleh & Rahman (2017) define succession planning as an intentional, systematic, preparation of leadership for the future. This process of passing the leadership baton serves as a mutual role adjustment

process between the founder and next-generation leader (Handler, 1994). A parallel process occurs whereby the heir moves through phases of increased involvement while the predecessor moves through phases of decreased involvement. Central aspects to this progressional dance are the transferral of leadership experience, authority, decision-making power, and equity. The execution of a thoughtful succession plan would result in a more effective leader who is capable of thinking adaptively and offering guidance and stability in the face of internal and external shifts (Northouse, 2016; McCollom Hampton, 1999).

Succession is a complex and problematic issue with only a 40% survival rate from the first to second generation, and only 13% to the third generation (Klein, 2010). Despite the consensus among scholars regarding the dependent relationship between succession planning and the intergenerational continuity of a business, this practice is often not implemented in family firms (Christensen, 1953; Dyer, 1986; Handler, 1992; Lansberg, 1988; Rosenblatt et al., 1985; Tashakori, 1977; Ward, 1987; Trow, 1961; Handler 1994). Thus, an unprepared successor from a younger generation would take control and not be equipped with the proper skills, knowledge, and capabilities necessary to run their family firm successfully. Ill-prepared, these leaders may unintentionally cause trauma to the individuals in the firm through inadequate or harmful leadership practices, impaired decision-making abilities, and unreasonable expectations causing harmful work routines, abusive workloads, and low morale (Lindsay, 2020). Considering the tapering survival rate of family-owned businesses as they are passed down through generations, efforts to prepare the new generation for leadership would significantly help families better ensure the survival of their legacy for generations to come.

Advantages to succession planning abound, proven to provide leadership continuity, increase key employee retention, reduce turnover, and improve business and financial results (LeCounte et al., 2017; Tamunomiebi & Okwakpam, 2019). Leadership development initiatives have been

positively associated with succession planning (Bozer et al., 2015). Bolstering new leaders' capabilities will guarantee organizational resilience, effectively countering potential threats, whether anticipated or unforeseen, to the organization's survival. Resilience can be defined as the ability to bounce back or recover from stress or adversity (Smith et al., 2008; Carver, 1998). The term "adaptation to stress" is often used interchangeably with resilience, underscoring the significance of a system's ability to adjust to change as a fundamental determinant of its resilience. Smith et al. (2008) define resilience resources as traits and factors that encompass qualities like optimism, active coping, and social support. These factors align with what Masten (2001) terms "human adaptational systems," illustrating the ordinary and attainable nature of resilience, contrary to the notion that resilience is an extraordinary phenomenon challenging to cultivate. As both a tool and an outcome, the concept of resilience constitutes a vital element in an organization's survival, playing a dual role in alleviating and emerging as a result of organizational trauma.

Dedicating appropriate resources to prepare a new leader for succession in a family business can result in a more confident, masterful successor, better capable of discerning the system's needs in diverse situations. Without nurturing these characteristics in the successor, they may be ineffective in fostering an environment conducive to organizational resilience or thriving. In fact, they might act in ways detrimental to the company's well-being due to a lack of awareness. Organizational trauma will ensue, affecting the company's culture, workforce, output, and financial performance. However, there is room for optimism. Similar to individuals facing toxic stress from trauma whose internal systems help them adapt and recover—a process called *allostasis*—companies can also adjust and rebound from organizational trauma (McEwen, 2000; Hormann, 2018). Internal systems and processes of an organization can be repaired, just like the body and brain can. By making efforts to improve the leadership in the company, a leader can subsequently help the

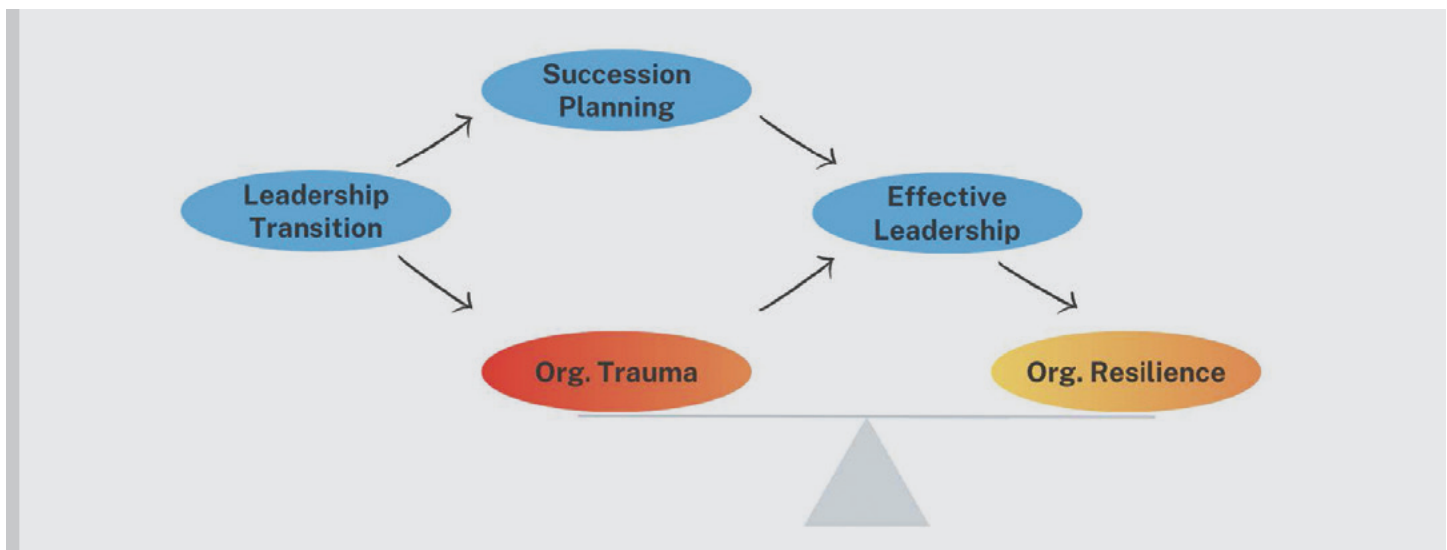


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

individuals in the organization process and heal from organizational trauma, thereby decreasing the symptoms caused by organizational trauma and increasing the company's resilience.

The model in Figure 1 depicts the relationship between organizational trauma, succession planning, leadership, and organizational resilience. Succession planning and leadership development can foster organizational resilience, potentially preventing or mitigating the symptoms of organizational trauma. If a company faces organizational trauma due to inadequate leadership preparation for succession, the resilience framework serves as a valuable tool for recovery and flourishing from organizational trauma by enabling an organization to sustain performance, withstand disruptions, recover rapidly, and adapt to changing circumstances. Therefore, an inverse relationship exists between organizational trauma and organizational resilience. The model serves as a diagnostic tool for practitioners and business owners.

It is evident that new-generational leadership in family-owned businesses is a precarious systemic change which has potentially harmful effects on the respective organizational system and on society at large. A cascading effect would occur, with the individual experience permeating families and communities and a collective experience adversely affecting the economy, thus the nation. No study has thus far examined organizational trauma in the context of family-owned businesses, nor has succession planning for

new-generational leaders as an antecedent to organizational trauma been explored. It is important for scholars, practitioners, and owners to better understand these phenomena due to the significant impact new-generational leadership changes can have on organizations and society at large. Thus, further investigation into this relevant and timely subject is essential.

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“This holistic approach aims to establish sustainable systems, cultivating not only the productivity and success of its members but also nurturing a high level of well-being while actively preventing experiences of oppression and discrimination-based trauma.”

Transformative Healing

A ‘Heart-Centered’ Transdisciplinary Framework for Addressing Organizational Trauma Arising from Oppression and Discrimination

By Colin Cooper

Abstract

This article introduces a transdisciplinary framework for healing organizational trauma resulting from oppression and discrimination. Grounded in universal spiritual truths and ethical principles, the heart-centered approach addresses root causes, emphasizing a holistic transformation of values, behaviors, and cultural parameters. Cooper critiques existing strategies, advocates for a paradigm shift in organizational development, and challenges traditional theories in industrial/organizational psychology. It explores sources and consequences of organizational trauma, including racialized collective trauma, urging a fundamental shift in culture. A three-pronged strategy for radical transformation is proposed, encompassing a heart-centered orientation, comprehensive diversity initiatives, and external influence. The transdisciplinary framework serves as a roadmap for fostering a healing environment and promoting well-being for all organizational stakeholders.

The importance of a transdisciplinary approach is emphasized, recognizing the diverse nature of individuals and the need to integrate spiritual and ethical dimensions in the workplace. The article underscores the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit, arguing that a deeper understanding of individuals as spiritual beings is essential for effective organizational healing. The author critiques existing theories in industrial/organizational psychology and organizational behavior for their limited incorporation of heart-centered and spiritual principles.

Keywords: organizational trauma; systemic oppression; sustainable transformation; racialized trauma; workplace relationships; discriminatory practices; professional growth; organizational development (OD); trauma-informed approach; inclusive policies; equitable practices; psychological perspective; workplace dynamics

Introduction

This article proposes a transdisciplinary conceptual framework to reduce, surmount, and heal organizational trauma caused by the oppression and discrimination of individuals and groups with marginalized status/identities (hereto termed “oppression and discrimination-based organizational trauma”). The framework employs a heart-centered orientation

grounded in holistic, universal-spiritual truths and ethical and mindfulness principles to address the root causes, challenges, and adverse outcome of the trauma. Oppression and discrimination-based organizational trauma can have profound adverse effects on all levels and members of an organization (i.e., individuals, groups, and systems) as well as the components of the organization (i.e., people, process, and structure/technology). Consequently,

this type of trauma significantly limits the organization's overall effectiveness and sustainability. Several researchers and authors (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Kalev et al., 2006; Lindsay, 2019; 2023; Rahimi & Aghababaei, 2020; Plaut et al., 2009; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Vinkenburg et al., 2011; Vivian et al., 2017) have identified and documented numerous systems and individual-level drawbacks and negative outcomes.

System challenges include:

1. Ineffectiveness of diversity programs
2. Decreased diversity and inclusion efforts
3. Higher staff replacement costs
4. Reduced staff productivity
5. Team conflicts

Challenges for individuals are:

1. Psychological distress—depression, anxiety
2. Impaired cognitive functioning on the job
3. Decreased well-being
4. Professional stagnation
5. Job loss

Current strategies and orientations for understanding and addressing discrimination and oppression-based organizational trauma are scant, fail to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework and strategies, and, more importantly, have only produced limited success or short-term remedies that do support the healing of the individual or collective trauma. Consequently, I propose a paradigm shift in how organization development (OD) practitioners, researchers, and organizational leaders, and other members understand, frame, address, mitigate, and heal this oppression and discrimination-based organizational trauma. This holistic-conceptual framework employs a transdisciplinary approach and requires an assessment of the fundamental root cause of the organizational trauma at three levels—individual, group, and systems. Fundamentally, the OD field should examine and transform, as appropriate, any personal, group, and organizational values, behavior, guiding principles, and cultural parameters that

foster oppression and discrimination-based trauma. Why? Because these variables hamper individual success and well-being and organizational effectiveness and sustainability (Schein, 2020). A re-examination of the fundamental philosophy, practices, and principles that guide individuals, groups, and organizational thinking, behavior, and attitude about how we live and work together as a collective, as interdependent groups and society is urgently needed given the high rates of hate, crimes, poverty, and existing level of racism, discrimination, and anti-Semitism in today's world. Specifically, the proposed heart-centered mindset addresses individual, group, and organization foundational ethical and spiritual guiding principles and values-related variables, such as. Respect, Integrity, Empathy, Cause and Effect, and Emotional Intelligence

Why is a Transdisciplinary Approach Important?

One size does not fit all; additionally, the OD field and society must fully recognize, accept, integrate, and embrace the role and influence of individual spiritual and ethical dimensions in the workplace, organizations, and society. We must accept this universal truth—all people are spiritual beings and the interplay of mind, body, and spirit. Based on my review of the literature and OD practices, I realized that much of the industrial/organizational and social psychology, organizational behavior, leadership, and management theories and practices that could be used to address oppression and discrimination-based organizational and collective trauma, only superficially incorporated heart-centered and universal spiritual truths, and ethical and mindfulness principles and philosophies. Understanding and addressing organizational trauma experienced by individuals and groups holding a marginalized group status are scant and fail to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework and strategies, and, very importantly, have produced only limited success or short-term remedies and do not focus on healing the traumatized individuals or the collective trauma. Consequently, I propose a

paradigm shift in how Organization Development (OD) practitioners, researchers, and organizational members must understand, frame, address, mitigate, and heal oppression and discrimination-based organizational trauma. I offer a “heart-centered,” transdisciplinary conceptual approach that requires assessing the root cause of oppression and discrimination-based organizational trauma at all three levels of the organization—individual, group, and system. Fundamentally, the OD field should examine and reshape, where appropriate, all relevant individual, group, and systems values, behavior, guiding/foundation principles, and cultural parameters that cause oppression and discrimination-based trauma and hamper individual success and ethical, and mindfulness principles and practices for greater clarity.

Why is a Transdisciplinary approach necessary? One size does not fit all; additionally, when the OD field and general society recognize, accept, and integrate the role and influence of a person's spiritual and ethical identity and dimensions in the workplace, organizations, and society, we operate from a fuller Knowledge-Based position and utilize more inclusive strategies. Science has shown that each person has an energetic field, and philosophy and religion support the proposition—the universal truth that—“people are spiritual beings in a physical body.” There is an interplay of mind, body, and spirit in all parts of our lives.

Defining Organizational and Collective Trauma

To understand the profound impact of organizational trauma, it is imperative to grasp the nuanced interplay between personal and collective trauma. Personal trauma, on an individual level, encapsulates the distress, psychological upheaval, and lasting repercussions experienced by a person following a traumatic event or circumstance. This could range from acute incidents to prolonged exposure to distressing situations. Conversely, collective trauma transcends individual experiences and encompasses the psychological distress experienced by a group, often arising

from shared traumas such as ethnic, racial, age-based, or marginalized membership status-related experiences. This communal distress has the potential to permeate and affect not only individuals but also entire cultures, organizations, communities, or even societies, as it becomes embedded in the collective memory of the traumatized group. The impact reverberates in various ways, from shaping outlooks and worldviews to inducing symptoms of psychological distress (Hirshberger, 2018; Lindsay, 2022).

Unpacking Organizational Trauma

Organizational trauma refers to the negative impact that traumatic events or chronic toxic conditions within an organization can have on its members (Vivian & Hormann,

2015). Within the context of organizations, trauma manifests as chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. This can be triggered by a range of factors including workplace accidents, toxic cultures, layoffs, acts of violence, or any other events that leave a lasting, detrimental impact on employees and the organization. The source of organizational trauma often lies in systemic issues, dysfunctional leadership, toxic cultural norms, or other traumatic occurrences within the workplace (Lindsay, 2021; Hormann, 2017).

The consequences are far-reaching, leading to diminished employee morale, heightened turnover rates, reduced productivity, and sustained psychological distress for those affected. Just as with collective trauma, individuals and

Addressing Racialized, Collective Trauma

stakeholders within organizations often grapple with the memories and mental reconstructions of these traumatic events (Lindsay, 2020; 2023). It is important to note that the effects of organizational trauma are not confined to employees alone; non-employee stakeholders like community members, board representatives, and consultants may also grapple with its repercussions.

Of particular concern is racialized, collective trauma, a global phenomenon rooted in circumstances, beliefs, values, and biases beyond the control of the victims. It encompasses the psychological and emotional distress borne out of exposure to racial discrimination, systemic racism, and racial violence. This trauma is experienced by individuals or communities targeted or marginalized based on race, ethnicity, or cultural identity. The effects of racialized trauma are far-reaching, exerting lasting influence on mental and emotional well-being (Gameon & Skewes, 2021; Kirkinis et al., 2018; Kleinman & Russ, 2020; Lebron et al., 2015; Lindsay, 2021; 2023). To truly combat discrimination-based trauma, a fundamental shift in organizational culture and values is necessary. OD practitioners, leaders, and other stakeholders must embrace a heart-centered orientation in conjunction with interventions such as DIE, racism, and oppression strategies, and legal actions directed at three levels: individual, group, and system. Additionally, the

focus of the change should extend beyond surface-level diversity efforts and encompass deep-seated, structural transformations (Blankenship & Thompson, 2020; Lindsay, 2021; 2023;). First, it must be clear that a radical shift in an organization's overall culture, members, stakeholders, and larger societal values is required to reduce and heal marginalized group members' oppression and discrimination-based trauma. I thus offer a three-pronged strategy to facilitate this radical transformation:

Stage 1:

Develop and Embrace a Heart-Centered Orientation:

1. Organizational Development (OD) practitioners, change agents, organizational leaders, members, and other stakeholders must individually and collectively embrace a "heart-centered orientation" to their personal and professional lives and the policies of the organization's policies, procedures, and practices. What is unique about an individual with a "heart-centered mindset"? They approach life from a place of inner strength, resiliency, courage, integrity, authenticity, and are guided by universal spiritual truths.
2. What are universal spiritual truths: A universal spiritual truth refers to a fundamental and timeless principle or concept believed to apply universally across different spiritual and philosophical traditions. It represents a fundamental understanding of the nature of existence and human experience and is often considered self-evident and is believed to apply to all individuals, regardless of their cultural or religious background. It resonates throughout humanity. It's something that others can relate to and can be a lesson we've learned. We often recognize a universal truth but cannot always understand it.
3. All organization members and consultants must be recruited, selected, trained, developed, evaluated, promoted, compensated, and retained based on the potential to learn/grow or possess and adhere to the content or empirically validated attributes that

represent a “heart-centered orientation.” Of course, OD practitioners, human resource specialists, and other stakeholders should include other job-pertinent competencies.

Stage 2: Develop and Implement Comprehensive Diversity and Change Initiatives:

1. Systematic and comprehensively implement relevant DIE initiatives and other change interventions, preventing and limiting oppression/discrimination-based organization trauma throughout the system. These initiatives may include the empowerment, development, transformation, and healing of people (organizational members and stakeholders), processes, technology, and structures at all levels within the system (i.e., individual, group, and organization-wide). Here are some of these strategies by category and levels:
 - a. **Individual-level**—Allow members to bring their authentic, spiritual selves to work in such areas as languages, dress, empowerment practices, and choice of financial or other benefit compensation such as insurance, tuition reimbursement, and commuting costs.
 - b. **Process/structure**—Create work cultures/norms that encourage, honor, and accept cultural practices where a person can be unique without shame. Some people may practice or value rituals that can openly or visibly “honor sacred space” in meetings, such as a formal meeting opening. The start of individual or teamwork activities might include openly playing indigenous music, celebrating, and calling on ancestral powers for protection and support.
 - c. **Structure/technology**—Additional cultural shifts may include workflow, physical layout, and flow of workspaces adaptations. For example, a learning center can be established based on environmental and energy psychology (e.g., Feng Shei decorations).

- d. **System-level initiatives**—In general, create true, mission-aligned organizational guiding principles based on human-centered principles that support inclusive communication systems, behavioral standards, and other cultural factors. Design nontraditional pathways for marginalized individuals/groups to be equitably developed, groomed, promoted, and respected. Overcoming biases toward others and building rich/open communication across diverse organizational members must be facilitated through a managed, structured learning and transformation process. Another example might include creating and reinforcing opportunities for older, more seasoned members to pass on their knowledge to less seasoned persons without fear of termination because of aging, use of medical benefits, or being criticized for deficiency in their technology skills. In contrast, the organization should honor their wisdom and accept them as “Sages who foster greater organization sustainability.”
2. Examining the needs of women may require unraveling leadership, mentoring, and evaluation practices that may have traumatized them based on adverse experiences in a patriarchal society and work organization. Lastly and most importantly, equally distribute the final profits/wealth and resources among all people—Alternatively, in some situations, most of the profits of the business may need to go to those with the lowest level of compensation or occupy low power—low financial reward position. In one scientific professionals’ association, the limited number of free parking spaces went to the conference planners and administrative staff rather than management or top leaders who could afford to pay for their own transportation and parking spaces.

Stage 3: Influence and Monitoring from the Organization’s External Environment:

1. Focus must also be given to the organization’s external environment, especially the larger society. The external community must continue to police the organization, make, and enforce relevant human and civil rights laws and principles to ensure compliance (cite references as an example of human rights principles—United Nations, etc. Buddhism) that protect marginalized groups and individuals. This ongoing oversight is essential for fostering a just and inclusive environment, where the rights and dignity of all members are respected.
2. Systematically implementing the outlined recommendations can facilitate a radically different organizational culture transformation. Over the long run, with proper incentives, all organizational members and stakeholders would strive to prioritize the best interest of individuals in conjunction with considering the collective needs of the group while honoring key individual differences, particularly those protected by civil and human rights laws and the guiding principles of the organization (Denison, 1995). We must create organizations composed of members, consultants, change agents, and stakeholders guided by a “heart-centered orientation.” They, in turn, will develop the relevant environment, competencies, policies, and practices to address, decrease, and possibly offer solutions which begin the healing of discrimination-oppression based organizational trauma with marginalized people and groups.
3. What is it, and how do you create one? Consider the proposed transdisciplinary conceptual framework below, guided by holistic, universal, spiritual, ethical, and mindfulness principles, to provide a starting point to question old paradigms.

What are the Assumptions of this Conceptual Framework?

I have alluded to a heart-centered orientation as a central piece of the equation for transformation and healing, but what exactly is it, and how do we get one? The proposed conceptual framework operates under several key assumptions:

1. A heart-centered orientation fosters a healthy organizational culture. This assumption aligns with extensive research highlighting the importance of leadership behaviors and organizational climate in shaping workplace culture (Denison et al., 1995; Schein, 2010).
2. We are spiritual entities inhabiting physical bodies, and our consciousness influences our environment and achievements. This assumption draws from holistic and spiritual philosophies, suggesting that our spiritual selves have a profound impact on our thoughts, actions, and interactions with the world (Combs, 2002, Ikeda, 2022; Wilber, 2000).
3. Systems are composed of individual people who collectively influence the culture. This assumption underscores the role of individuals within organizations and their collective influence on organizational culture (Morgeson et al., 2005; Schneider, 2000).
4. Organization members possess a “spiritual and energy body” and consciousness level, which in turn influence the organization’s culture. This assumption integrates spiritual and energy concepts into the organizational context, suggesting that individuals’ spiritual and energy states can impact the overall culture (Lama, 1998; Tolle, 2004).
5. The law of attraction guides human behavior. This assumption draws from the law of attraction concept, suggesting that individuals attract experiences and outcomes based on their thoughts and energy (Hicks, 2006; Dyer, 2006).
6. These guiding principles and assumptions affect the organization’s collective spiritual, ethical orientation, EI, propensity to engage in oppression, and discrimination-based organizational

trauma. They also collectively form the foundation upon which the heart-centered orientations built, guiding its implementation within an organization.

Actualizing the Consciousness-Enhancement Process

The consciousness-enhancement process is a pivotal component of the proposed framework. It involves consciously aligning with higher consciousness, leading to the development of a heart-centered orientation. It is an energetic, emotional, and belief-system balancing process that facilitates change, growth, and transformation

A heart-centered orientation is a philosophy of life, attitude, and mindset outlining how human beings should be viewed, treated, and work together collectively while honoring and celebrating differences. Based on my work as an industrial-organizational psychologist, OD, and Buddhist scholar and practitioner, I operationally defined this mindset as possession of and acting from a set of human-centered values, attitudes, and behaviors that compassionate sense of being interconnected, empathetic, and authentic individuals commonly embody.

within individuals and organizations. The multi-faceted process may include practices such as meditation, mindfulness training, energy healing, self-reflection, and other spiritual practices which encourage individuals to explore their inner selves, confront limiting beliefs, and develop a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness with others and the broader universe. Through this process, individuals elevate their consciousness and adopt a heart-centered mindset that guides their thoughts, actions, and interactions within the organizational context.

At the core of the proposed transdisciplinary framework lies the heart-centered orientation which fosters consciously enhanced thinking and behavior, and it places paramount importance on values such as compassion,

unity, and inclusivity (Cooper, 2022; Keltner et al., 2014; Lilius, et al., 2008 Lindsay, 2021; 2023). This approach finds support in existing research on spiritual and servant leadership, which emphasizes qualities like humility, empathy, and selflessness (Fry et al., 2005; Sosik et al., 2004). These qualities resonate with the heart-centered mindset and underscore its potential to transform organizational cultures.

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industrial-organizational psychologist, OD, and Buddhist scholar and practitioner, I operationally defined this mindset as possession of and acting from a set of human-centered values, attitudes, and behaviors that compassionate sense of being interconnected, empathetic, and authentic individuals commonly embody. The orientation encapsulates a way of being in the world, founded on holistic, universal spiritual, ethical principles, research and writings from behavioral science, organizational behavior, leadership practices and philosophies, and metaphysical and Nichiren Buddhist spiritual writings. Throughout my work in OD consulting, social justice, leadership and transformation coaching, empowerment, and healing practices, I have consistently witnessed that a heart-centered mindset guided organizational

member's energetic vibration, words, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavior who stood for justice and work for the good of all. For clarity, let's define a few terms: holistic, universal, or spiritual principles:

Holistic principles consider the interconnectedness of elements within a system, taking a comprehensive view of how various factors interact.

Spiritual principles are rooted in beliefs about the nature of reality, the purpose of life, and the ethical conduct that aligns with these beliefs. They guide individuals in matters of morality and personal growth. Individuals may integrate these principles uniquely depending on their belief systems and perspectives. For example, some may see spiritual principles as overarching, guiding principles that influence how they interpret and apply holistic principles.

For this paper, universal spiritual principles expand across all religions and cultures and are acceptable general "spiritual truths." Some research in physics and medicine has found proof of human aura, energy, and vibrational fields surrounding humans, etc. Cooper (2022) and Thomas Hübl (2020) suggest that individuals who possess/display vital characteristics such as compassion, interconnectedness, understanding of the "group consciousness", and human empathy tend to engage in lower levels of oppressive and racist conduct and experience a higher sense of well-being and purpose (Ikeda, 2022).

The orientation is profound and goes beyond intellectual understanding. It is a way of being in the world rooted in ethical, spiritual, and universal principles about life and how individuals should work together collectively and honor diverse groups of people. Practically, a person operating from this orientation approaches interactions, decisions, and relationships with a deep sense of care and consideration for others and recognizes the inherent value and dignity of every human being.

Their actions reflect a genuine desire to promote well-being and harmony. President Ikeda, a renowned international ambassador of peace and Buddhist scholar,

and states, "It is important for each person to embark on a journey searching for truth. However, the truth lies in compassionate actions to assist the weak or those enduring hardship and suffering. It is not to be found in highbrow and possess only intellectual knowledge"(Ikeda, 1998, p.19).

Overview of the universal spiritual, ethical, moral, and mindfulness principles to Heart-Centered Orientation

This mindset finds support in existing research on spiritual and servant leadership, which emphasizes qualities like humility, empathy, and selflessness (Fry et al., 2005; Sosik et al., 2004). These qualities resonate with the heart-centered mindset and underscore its potential to transform organizational cultures.

Researchers have investigated the role of spiritual, ethical, moral, and mindfulness principles in the workplace, organizations, and leadership roles, and some findings further support the utility of the orientation for member empowerment, employee well-being, and understanding organizational trauma (Liden et al, 2008; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Decuyper et al, 2018; Hareli et al 2017).

Other studies on spiritual and servant leadership support a heart-centered orientation as well and these leadership models and practices emphasize authenticity, empathy, ethical behavior, and a sense of purpose. It involves integrating personal values, beliefs, and a deep connection with others and the organization's mission. Spiritual leaders prioritize the well-being of individuals and the collective, striving for a harmonious and compassionate workplace culture (Keltner, 2014). In summation, the research on servant and service leadership, emotional intelligence, and the spiritual teachings of Nichiren Buddhism supports, and fosters values related to practicing a heart-centered orientation. Notably, and consistently the attributes/principles of compassion, empathy, and wisdom are essential to facilitate healthy communication and understanding among people in general and across diverse groups (e.g., race, gender, religion, age) and enhance leadership effectiveness (Ikeda, 2022).

How can a person or organization apply the orientation and what is the impact?

A heart-centered orientation has the potential to transform organizational culture, mitigate trauma, and enhance the overall well-being of individuals within the organization. By fostering trust, collaboration, and mutual respect, it can lead to increased employee engagement, improved job satisfaction, and heightened productivity (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Spreitzer, 2005). In my professional roles as a learning officer, an anti-oppression and racism change agent, researcher, and evaluator, I have explored a few aspects of the heart-centered conceptual framework, and one talent development client organization as a case study is noteworthy. The employee survey data revealed a moderate negative correlation between racially-based organizational trauma and trust in management and coworkers from a race other than their own. Other data showed a correlation between perceptions of workplace discrimination and oppression-discrimination-based organization trauma and perceived compassion, respectfulness, and inclusionary-behavior of the leader and coworkers.

Because the orientation has been shown to be correlated with oppression and discrimination-based organizational trauma, I train OD practitioners engaged in anti-oppression and discrimination work, on the principles of equity, respect, justice, inclusivity, community, compassion, and abundance, a win/win philosophy. As such organizational members and leaders who possess and subscribe to these principles and attributes (heart-centered orientation) tend to have higher internal locus of control, greater flexibility, and creativity, make decisions, design, and implement organizational systems (e.g. recruitment, hiring, job placement, promotion, development, compensation policies, and practices) that discourages oppression and discrimination based-organization trauma.

What is a consciousness-enhancement process and its relationship to reducing oppression and discrimination-based trauma?

In general, individuals operating from a heart-centered orientation are aligned with select universal truths/principles. Alignment can be achieved by ascending to higher levels of human consciousness through activities such as mindfulness, meditation, energy work, grounding, breath work, hypnosis and Chi enhancement practices, which leads to greater self-awareness, discovery and ultimately transformation. In the practice of Nichiren Buddhism, alignment here is called doing one's "human revolution." Research suggests the "heart" heavily influences human behavior more than intellect or the brain. However, human beings in organizational settings rarely use their "heart energy" to guide their decisions, policies, and behavior (Cooper, 2022). However, it is very urgent that we develop and employ a better process to include more of our "heart-energy" in the field of OD to improve organizational effectiveness and sustainability and member well-being and success without unnecessary oppression and discrimination-based trauma.

The consciousness-enhancement process is a pivotal component of the proposed framework. This process involves consciously aligning with higher consciousness, leading to the development of a heart-centered orientation. It is an energetic, emotional, and belief-system balancing process that facilitates change, growth, and transformation within individuals and organizations. The multi-faceted process may include practices such as meditation, mindfulness training, energy healing, and self-reflection. It encourages individuals to explore their inner selves, confront limiting beliefs, and develop a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness with others and the broader universe. Through this process, individuals can elevate their consciousness and adopt a heart-centered mindset that guides their thoughts, actions, and interactions within the organizational context.

In the realm of heart-centered orientations, specific dimensions emerge as

fundamental pillars, shaping an individual's mindset and influencing their approach to work and interpersonal relationships. The central focus revolves around emotional intelligence, a cornerstone that involves a heightened awareness of one's emotions and an empathetic understanding of others. This self-awareness and empathy form the bedrock for navigating intricate interpersonal dynamics with grace and wisdom. Compassion is a defining characteristic of this orientation, manifesting as an empathetic response to the challenges faced by others. Rooted in genuine concern rather than personal gain, individuals with a heart-centered mindset extend support and lend a listening ear, fostering positive relationships and collaboration (Batson et al., 1987; Decety & Jackson, 2004).

Recognizing the profound interconnectedness of all beings, the heart-centered orientation acknowledges that actions and choices have far-reaching ripple effects, influencing not only individuals but the broader collective. This perspective promotes collaboration, teamwork, and a sense of unity, embracing diversity and considering mistakes as opportunities to learn (Hackman, 1987; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Inclusivity and respect are actively cultivated by those with a heart-centeredness, creating environments where every voice is heard and valued. This commitment extends across organizational life, from decision-making processes to the celebration of achievements, fostering a culture of belonging (Cox & Blake, 1991; Nishii, 2013). The principle of abundance focus encourages individuals to operate under the belief that there are enough rewards and resources for all. Shifting from a mindset of scarcity to one of abundance fosters a positive atmosphere, encouraging growth, collaboration, and innovative thinking (Avey et al., 2011; Fredrickson, 2001).

Mindfulness and a sense of presence are integral components of the heart-centered orientation, contributing to emotional resilience and well-being. These practices help manage stress and anxiety, enabling individuals to respond effectively to challenges and make informed decisions (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hülshager et

al., 2013). Encouraging contribution and embracing the principle of cause and effect (Karma) are additional dimensions. Fostering an inclusive atmosphere where diverse perspectives are valued contributes to equitable decision-making processes and prevents marginalization. The principle of cause and effect underscores the importance of mindful consideration of actions and their consequences, promoting responsible decision-making and ethical behavior (Grant, 2008; Rosso et al., 2010).

In essence, a heart-centered orientation encompasses a rich tapestry of emotional intelligence, compassion, interconnectedness, inclusivity, abundance focus, mindfulness, and a commitment to contribution and ethical decision-making. These dimensions collectively form a holistic framework that not only guides individual behavior but also cultivates positive organizational cultures and collaborative work environments.

In general, the heart-centered mindset encompasses several key domains that are integral to fostering a healthy organizational culture and eliminating oppression and discrimination-based trauma. A heart-centered orientation has the potential to transform organizational culture, mitigate trauma, and enhance the overall well-being of individuals within the organization. By fostering trust, collaboration, and mutual respect, it can lead to increased employee engagement, improved job satisfaction, and heightened productivity (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Spreitzer et al., 2005).

How can a person improve or develop a heart-centered orientation?

What does doing one's human revolution mean conceptually and practically?

A heart-centered orientation has the potential to transform organizational culture, mitigate trauma, and enhance the overall well-being of individuals within the organization. By fostering trust, collaboration, and mutual respect, it can lead to increased employee engagement, improved job satisfaction, and heightened productivity (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Thomas Hübl, an expert on collective trauma across society, and Daisaka

Ikeda, expert Buddhist philosopher and role model of peace and humanitarian efforts, suggest that all members of traumatized organizations must become more spiritually evolved people. They must develop deeper states of consciousness, and which will help us to reframe our orientation in life.” In language of Nichiren Buddhism, we must “do our human revolution.” An enlightened spiritual person is aware that they are part of a bigger context, and it is more than an idea. They can develop deeper states of consciousness, which helps them to reframe or realign their orientation and values in life toward the principles, competencies, and assumptions underlying a heart-centered mindset. Therefore, they can move toward developing compassion, empathy, higher EI, interconnectedness, despite the trauma and restrictions.

“Human revolution is a revolution in our actions and behavior. Human revolution means to purposefully engage in behavior that is grounded in compassion, in actions that break free from the cycle of the six paths and bring us to the worlds of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood.”

—Daisaku Ikeda

Human Revolution | Soka Gakkai (global) sokaglobal.org

“One of the core tenets of Buddhism is that our practice can emancipate us from delusion and guide us toward acting wisely and bravely to positively transform ourselves and our world. Indeed, the actualization of our enlightenment lies in this effort, this human revolution.”

—Majied, 2023

<https://tricycle.org/article/buddhism-emancipation/>

This consciousness-enhancement process is a pivotal component of the proposed framework and involves consciously aligning with higher consciousness, which ultimately leads to enhance power, hope, and heart-centeredness. The process is an energetic, emotional, and belief-system balancing process that facilitates change, growth,

and transformation within individuals and organizations. Nichiren Buddhism calls it “Human Revolution.” Ikeda (2023) further states that a great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all human beings. (Human Revolution | Soka Gakkai [global]) (sokaglobal.org)

This is a multi-faceted process may include meditation, mindfulness training, energy healing, self-reflection, coaching, courage dialogues, dialogic OD techniques and other spiritual practices. I have studied and practice all of these strategies and am a

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strong advocate and practitioner of the spiritual practice of

Nichiren Buddhism (i.e. the chanting of “Nam Myo Renge Kyo,” and the study and practice of the teachings and the doctrines). All of these consciousness-enhancement strategies encourage individuals to explore their inner selves, confront limiting beliefs, and develop a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness with others and the broader universe. Through this process, individuals can elevate their consciousness levels and develop compassion, wisdom, empathy and hope which then guides their thoughts, actions, and interactions within the organizational context and the larger community. Due to time constraints the human revolutionary process cannot be fully explained here. However, the focus is on aligning and elevating a person’s spiritual, ethical, emotional intelligence and connection to a

“higher or expanded self” and the universal truths previously identified.

To examine a practical application of human revolution and its relation to discrimination and oppression-based trauma, consider the following scenario. Assume you are an organization member from a marginalized group—perhaps a woman, a person of color with an accent or some other limiting attribute according to traditional “White-Matriarchy, Supremacy Culture”. Although you are properly credentialed, highly motivated, bright and flexible, you have been passed over for several developmental and promotional opportunities over the last three years. Or perhaps

you rarely receive coaching by key leaders, team members fail to include you in high profile client meetings and on high visibility grants and contracts. You also notice other organizational members similar to your demographic and ethnic/racial profile consistently failing to be promoted, earning less salaries and/or separating from the organizations after 2–3 years. Here are some questions for you the reader to answer and reflect on:

1. What are the issues and what should you and the organization do?
2. Is there a potential for organizational trauma here? Why or why not?
3. How could or should a consciously enhanced or a “heart-centered orientation” focus be applied here by you, other organization leaders, members and stakeholder to influence the situation?

Here are some additional points to ponder for organizations and individuals who are experiencing oppression or discrimination-based trauma. First, all organizational members in both the marginalized group and nonmarginalized groups must identify and acknowledge the symptoms and the adverse effect of the collective trauma in this situation. Some other useful questions and concerns:

1. How is the trauma hurting the traumatized person, members of her identity group and the larger organization?
2. Why is this traumatizing behavior happening?
3. What roles are you playing in traumatizing marginalized people, or being traumatized personally as a marginalized group member?
4. How does or will these negative experiences affect you now and in the future? How will it affect the organization and larger community? Do you care as an individual or leader? Consider a heart-centered orientation.
5. What support systems or resources will you/system need to fully address the situation and have courageous inner and outer dialogues with all stakeholders?

No traumatized persons or groups should become or remain a victim and accept oppressive and discriminatory conditions when they grow spiritually and ethically through consciously enhanced practices such as meditation, mindfulness, spiritual practice, shamanism, Reiki healing, open dialoguing and reflection. All organizational members must acknowledge that oppression and discrimination-based collective trauma, hurts everyone—not just the recipients of the adverse treatment. Perpetrators are also hurt because of the loss of humanity since we are all ultimately interconnected. Each person party to the trauma must undergo their human revolution and become aligned with universal spiritual and ethical principles such as: (1) cause and effect, (2) law of attraction, (3) unity (itai doshin), and (4) interconnectedness. Also, the traumatized can ascend to a higher state of consciousness and not become permanently hampered

by the limitation of anger, pain, fear, and resentment. Each person must take responsibility for their behavior and transformation—become aligned with universal spiritual and ethical principles by cultivating self-awareness and practicing mindfulness. Through a conscious commitment to understanding one's actions and their impact on others, individuals can embark on a journey of self-transformation guided by timeless values that transcend cultural and religious boundaries.

The organization as a group of consciously enhanced, realigned people, can break the cycle. Then, victims can reclaim

The organization as a group of consciously enhanced, realigned people, can break the cycle. Then, victims can reclaim their power, prevent future traumatization, and move away from the part of us that keeps us from seeing our true power. We should or must understand that trauma is not a phenomenon that can block our path but may be part of our path. Through trauma, or despite it, we can connect to a deeper source, expanding our capacity for growth and power. Research shows that when we feel we can give, we become more generous. It is the “heart that matters” when we strive to facilitate change within individuals and organizations, not just laws and diversity initiatives.

their power, prevent future traumatization, and move away from the part of us that keeps us from seeing our true power. We should or must understand that trauma is not a phenomenon that can block our path but may be part of our path. Through trauma, or despite it, we can connect to a deeper source, expanding our capacity for growth and power. Research shows that when we feel we can give, we become more generous. It is the “heart that matters” when we strive to facilitate change within individuals and organizations, not just laws and diversity initiatives. Actual radical change cannot fully be accepted and embraced if individuals only embrace the work from the head which correlates with research on the brain-heart connection (Edwards et al., 2022; Ikeda, 2022).

What are recommended steps for assessment and developing a heart-centered orientation in organizations?

The steps and possible tools/processes for an individual-level approach may include the following:

1. **Assess/evaluate** each domain of the orientation. Consider using standardized EI and 360 assessment tools.
2. **Create a developmental plan**—may include training, coaching, cognitive behavioral therapy, and shadowing. Other tools/strategies should include tools for reflection. Consider meditation, hypnosis, energy work such as

Reiki, Tai Chi. Chi Qong which have been used to modify energy and vibrational shifts.

3. **Implement plan**—ongoing and may take months to years.
4. **Evaluate and reassess**—obtain feedback from peers, leaders, customers, friends, perhaps marginalized organizational members, groups, friends and customers who have been traumatized.

In conclusion, my dedicated endeavor is aimed at guiding individuals, organizational members, stakeholders, and the broader organizational culture toward a transformative and heart-centered orientation. This holistic approach aims to establish sustainable systems, cultivating not only the productivity and success of its

members but also nurturing a high level of well-being while actively preventing experiences of oppression and discrimination-based trauma.

Within the framework of my mission-driven initiatives, I categorize my client systems under the banner of “social justice” organizations (Edwards et al., 2022; Ikeda, 2022). This designation signifies a specialized subset committed to creating positive change. Additionally, I occasionally employ the term “traumatized systems” when it best captures the nuanced challenges organizations face. Trauma, in my understanding, represents an experience that catches a group emotionally and cognitively unprepared, temporarily overwhelming its defensive structures, leaving the entity vulnerable (H. F. Stein, personal communication, September 9, 2004). Addressing and healing this embedded trauma is central to my transformative efforts.

In navigating this transformative journey, I acknowledge and confront the impact of privilege, often invisible yet influential. Privilege bestows advantages to members of dominant groups, sometimes at the expense of individuals from marginalized groups, such as white privilege or male privilege. Conversely, my commitment extends to recognizing and dismantling the conditions faced by oppressed groups, encompassing exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Edwards et al., 2022; Ikeda, 2022). Through this commitment, I strive to create organizations that not only embody heart-centered orientations but also prioritize social justice, inclusivity, and the well-being of every individual.

As I forge ahead, my focus remains on fostering positive change, contributing to the growth and resilience of individuals and organizations alike, and championing a future where the principles of social justice and a heart-centered mindset flourish.

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“While a narcissistic manager may look like a problem, the actual issue is not the person, but the organizational system. To be specific, the issue is the reluctance and/or inability of the whole organizational system to deal with narcissistic behaviors of the manager.”

The Problem of Consulting for Organizations Led by Narcissists

By John Conbere,
Alla Heorhiadi,
David Swenson

Abstract

Narcissistic leaders can be charming and confident, to the extent that they rise through organizational ranks faster, and earn more, than many of their peers. At the same time, the organizations they lead tend to earn less than rival companies. In this article we explore the meaning and implications of narcissism in the workplace and suggest some tips for OD practitioners when working in organizations led by narcissists.

Keywords: Narcissistic leader, narcissism, symptoms of narcissism, Organization Development

Many years ago, we consulted with an organization with a charming and enthusiastic CEO. We started working with departments and slowly progressed to working with the executive leadership team which included working with the whole team and individual coaching to team members, including the CEO. The more we worked with the executive team, the more it became obvious that the CEO was a major part of the organizational dysfunctions. He did not like it when people disagreed with him; he dominated at the executive meetings; he thought of his ideas as brilliant ones and did not want to consider the opinions of others. The CEO never admitted to any mistakes or wrongdoing, it was always someone else's fault. The team members were afraid to voice their opinions or bring issues to the CEO as he could become displeased and angry.

We saw individual coaching of the CEO as a venue to deliver honest feedback and help him recognize that he was part of the problem, and perhaps help him change his behavior. At these coaching sessions, the CEO was charming and inviting. He said the right things, he talked about his

networking and history of the organization, he used jokes and stories to demonstrate his skillful leadership. He was seemingly open to our feedback, but then he would come up with an explanation of how some problems were caused by someone else's lack of the skill and commitment.

At the end of every coaching session, we had a strange feeling that we had been manipulated. The coaching sessions resembled an illusionist's show where a magician does a slide of hand to fool the audience. We could not catch the moment when our feedback was artfully twisted into another story about the CEO's greatness and his promise to take care of people who caused the problem. We were stunned; we watched him with metaphorically “dropped jaws” and could not understand how he was able to turn the coaching session into his one man show.

We wondered if we needed to be more aggressive or clearer in naming the issues that we saw were happening. And yet at the end of each meeting, we felt like we were fooled again. Eventually the coaching sessions with the CEO became less regular due to his travels and other commitments.

We suspected that, after exhausting his repertoire of tricks in his sleeve, we stopped being the audience of interest to him.

At that time, we did not recognize that we were dealing with a highly narcissistic CEO, as there was not much information about narcissism available outside the field of psychology. Recently the topic of narcissism became more popular, and one can find articles about narcissistic CEOs in academic and practitioner journals. While there some information about narcissistic leadership is available for organization development (OD) practitioners, there is still little information about how to deal with a narcissistic CEO during OD interventions.

In this paper, we explore the impact of narcissistic CEOs on organizations, look for signs that indicate a narcissistic CEO, and offer possible actions for internal and external practitioners if they suspect issues of narcissism in their clients. We use the term CEO to talk about top leaders, even though some may have different titles.

Definition of Narcissistic Leadership

Narcissism, or pathological self-absorption, takes its name from Narcissus, the character in Greek myth who fell in love with his own reflection. While Sigmund Freud considered narcissism a normal stage in child development, he treated it as a disorder in adulthood.

In our literature search, we concluded that there is not a consistent definition of what a narcissist is; some authors write about the positive aspects of narcissistic CEOs and others only write about narcissistic CEOs as people with personality disorders. The validity of how CEOs were measured as being narcissistic seemed to us at times questionable. We also found some advice to employees in practitioner journals often was simplistic. In our attempt to sort this all out, we use the definition of the American Psychiatric Association.

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines narcissism as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity in fantasy or behavior, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood

and present in a variety of contexts, and as indicated by five (or more) of the following nine traits.

First, narcissistic people have a grandiose sense of self-importance, often exaggerate their own achievements and talents, and expect to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements. Second, narcissistic people can be preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love. Third, narcissistic people tend to believe that they are “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special people or people of high-status. This trait often leads to the fourth trait, which is the sense of entitlement. For example, the person may have either an unreasonable expectation of especially favorable treatment or expectation of automatic compliance with his or her expectations. Fifth, narcissistic people may take advantage of others to achieve their own needs, to the extent of being exploitive. Sixth, narcissistic people require continuous or excessive admiration. Seventh, narcissistic people lack empathy and are unwilling to recognize the needs and feelings of others. Eighth, narcissistic people are often envious of others or believe that others are envious of them. And ninth, narcissistic people frequently show arrogant, haughty behaviors and attitudes (APA, 2013, pp. 669–670).

As one can see, these characteristics create a picture of a severely disturbed person. At the same time, some of these traits are not unique to narcissists. Different people may demonstrate narcissistic behaviors at times, in different contexts, at different stages of their lives; and if people grow and develop, they may later regret their behaviors.

Also, not every narcissist always shows all the traits mentioned above. In order to recognize whether one deals with a narcissist, one needs to look for repeated behavioral patterns, a combination of more than one of these traits, and the intensity or severity of a certain behavior. In fact, these behaviors may define a range of narcissistic CEOs, with varying frequency and intensity of the narcissistic behaviors, from mild and slightly annoying, to toxic and dangerous.

Some authors write about narcissism as a scale on which on one end is positive and productive self-confidence, and on the other end is delusional self-confidence accompanied by malignant and destructive behaviors (Campbell, 2017; Tayon, 2021). Defining what is normal behavior for each specific individual is somewhat subjective. For instance, Gabbard and Crisp-Han (2016) wrote, “There is a continuum of narcissism, and the point where healthy self-esteem ends and pathological narcissism begins is highly arbitrary” (p. 115). Therefore, readers can be confused if the authors do not state how they define narcissism.

Reading about and dealing with narcissistic CEOs in real situations are two different things. In real life, it does not matter if the source of narcissistic behavior is the person’s weak self-esteem or pathological grandiosity. Working for narcissistic CEOs is challenging. They do not listen well to others due to the perception that they are smarter than others. They may lie, or cheat, or steal to serve their need to be right, or superior, or better than others. If the narcissistic CEOs perceive a threat to their imagined self-importance, they become hostile and aggressive and may attack the perceived challenger.

Organizations with Narcissistic Leadership

There appear to be more narcissistic leaders than is currently recognized. In one study, the estimated number of narcissistic CEOs, on a 1–7 scale with 7 as highest, was: 18% of CEOs were rated at 5, 9% were rated at 6 and 2% were rated at 7, the most extreme form of narcissism (Tayan, 2021). Another study estimated that 5% of CEOs are highly narcissistic (Wright, 2017).

While there has not been much research about how narcissists gain leadership positions, the working assumption is that narcissists tend to be exceptionally good at self-promotion. One Italian study found that people who were highly narcissistic moved up in their careers to the CEO level 29% faster than their peers (Robson, 2021). The rapid movement of narcissists up the corporate ladder means they

might have less experience to temper their destructive behaviors.

Leadership team. As narcissistic CEOs move up the corporate ladder, they recruit and promote subordinates who flatter them and reinforce their narcissism (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; O'Reilly, 2019). Surrounding themselves with flatterers and “yes-people” reinforces even more the delusions of the narcissist. Often leadership teams with a narcissistic CEO consist of sycophants, people who would praise insincerely to gain some advantage. Eventually, people on the top and in the rest of

aside voluntarily, appalled by the growing pathology around them” (Taylor, 2019).

Those who try to challenge narcissists in any way will be punished. Narcissists’ subordinates respond by acting out through behaviors like “absenteeism, withholding information, and even sabotage” and are “less satisfied, more stressed, and less committed to their organizations” (O'Reilly et al., 2019, p. 421).

The result of living with narcissistic CEOs is there is much less collaboration among employees throughout the organization, during the reign of the narcis-

The result of living with narcissistic CEOs is there is much less collaboration among employees throughout the organization, during the reign of the narcissist and for some time after the narcissist leaves. “Like carriers of a virus, narcissistic CEOs ‘infect’ the very cultures of their organizations... leading to dramatically lower levels of collaboration and integrity at all levels—even after they are gone.”

the organization live in very different realities. Having two realities in one organization negatively impacts the organizational climate.

Organizational climate. It is difficult to have collaboration in organizations led by narcissists. Narcissistic CEOs do not really listen to people, as they believe they know what is best. Narcissists might claim that their goal is what is best for the organization, but ultimately their goal is to serve their own needs, one of which is to be always right. Their conviction of always being right leads narcissists to believe that they never make mistakes. Problems are always caused by other people, which leads to the culture of blame and fear (Gaskell, 2020).

Narcissistic CEOs want managers who flatter the CEO (O'Reilly et al., 2019). The Polish psychologist Andrew Lobaczewski studied leaders with pathological disorders, and concluded that “pathological leaders tend to attract other people with psychological disorders. At the same time, empathetic and fair-minded people gradually fall away. They are either ostracized or step

sist and for some time after the narcissist leaves. “Like carriers of a virus, narcissistic CEOs ‘infect’ the very cultures of their organizations... leading to dramatically lower levels of collaboration and integrity at all levels—even after they are gone” (Butts, 2020).

Organizational finances. Companies led by narcissists do not perform better financially than other companies, and at times even worse. Organizations with narcissistic CEOs tend to have “significantly lower stock-price performance in absolute terms and relative to the S&P 500 (Tayan, 2019). After the financial crisis, banks with narcissistic CEOs recovered more slowly than rival banks. Wright (2017) showed that firms with narcissistic CEOs were slower to recover after the financial crisis” (O'Reilly et al., 2019). Narcissistic CEOs tend to pay more than is needed for acquisitions (Atkas et al., 2016; Wales et al., 2013). Several accounting studies found that narcissistic CEOs are more likely to manipulate earnings than other CEOs, and are more often found guilty of fraud (O'Reilly et al., 2019).

Despite narcissists’ poor long-term performance, they tend to be rewarded

well. One study found that narcissistic CEOs “receive median total compensation that is 33 percent higher (\$10.34 million) than CEOs that are not narcissistic (\$7.79 million)” (Tayan, 2021).

Organizational integrity. The narcissistic CEOs’ behaviors, such as lying, cheating, or requiring unethical behavior of their subordinates, undermine the integrity of employees (Butts, 2020; Gaskell, 2020). Robson (2021) found that narcissistic CEOs “are more likely to engage in aggressive tax avoidance and commit managerial fraud. Some management scientists have even speculated that narcissism can bring down entire companies, as may have been the case with the fall of Enron in 2001.” One pattern of having a narcissistic CEO was significantly less investment in research and development (Wand et al., 2022).

The consequences of having a narcissistic CEO have been described as financial damage to the organization, lower cooperation and morale among employees, rash and dishonest decision-making, legal problems arising from dishonest practices, and so on (Cragun, 2019; Wright, 2017).

In summary, narcissistic leadership creates many organizational dysfunctions. Despite poor economic performance and questionable integrity of the organization, narcissistic CEOs can manipulate boards of directors into increasing their rewards. Their “I know best” approach alienates many employees and severely damages morale. Collaboration among people and the organizational integrity are severely reduced under narcissistic leadership.

Practical Suggestions for OD Practitioners Working with Narcissists

In the following section we explore possible actions and roles of an OD practitioner in working in different capacities: a) with a narcissistic CEO and b) with groups that have been impacted by narcissistic leadership. Working in each capacity has its own objectives and challenges.

Working with the CEO

At first, it is hard to discern whether a leader is narcissistic, as often narcissistic people are charming and seemingly open,

Table 1. *Red Flags That Signal About Narcissistic Leadership in Organizations*

Observed Behaviors	Observed Outcomes
CEO does not listen to advice or opinion of others	CEO is surrounded by “yes-men” who blindly support the CEO (sycophants)
CEO becomes hostile and vengeful when challenged	Morale is low because of the behaviors of the CEO or the CEO’s sycophants
CEO always insists she/he is right	Excessive fear of employees of speaking honestly
CEO demonstrates an inflated sense of his/her ability	Employee turnover is high because of the behaviors of the CEO or the CEO’s sycophants
CEO allows and/or requires unethical behavior	Legal problems arise due to fraud and tax avoidance
CEO tells lies	Mistrust or disrespect among executives, employees; high level of anxiety
CEO screams or yells at employees	People are reluctant to bring up issues to the CEO

and they exude confidence. Later, in the process of data collection, the practitioner may observe some artifacts and behaviors that signal that the organization is led by a narcissist. The practitioner may also have a feeling that the intervention is going with some difficulties or is not working at all.

Given the large number of narcissists at the helm of corporations today, the challenge facing organizations is to ensure that such CEOs do not self-destruct or lead the company to disaster. That can take some doing because it is very hard for narcissists to work through their issues—and virtually impossible for them to do it alone. Narcissists need colleagues and even therapists if they hope to break free from their limitations. But because of their extreme independence and self-protectiveness, it is very difficult to get near them. (Maccoby, 2004, p. 94)

Recognizing narcissistic behaviors.

The CEO’s narcissistic behavior will influence in some ways the rest of the organization, which can be observed during the intervention. In *Table 1*, we show examples of narcissistic behaviors and possible outcomes of the behavior. Behaviors can be

observed by the OD practitioner or can be described by employees who are involved in the intervention with the practitioner. The outcomes that are results of narcissistic behaviors can be observed by the practitioner or reported by employees.

We want to emphasize two obvious things. First, it is important to understand that no single behavior would merit thinking a person is narcissistic; one needs to look for patterns and intensity of the behaviors and the severity of outcomes.

Second, OD practitioners are not trained psychotherapists and cannot legitimately diagnose narcissistic disorders. In fact, only a licensed medical professional, after a medical examination, can provide a diagnosis. However, a practitioner may notice that behaviors of the CEO, or the CEOs who try to emulate the CEO (the in-group of sycophants) resemble narcissistic behaviors.

Choices of action. If a practitioner is convinced that the OD intervention is not working because of a highly narcissist CEO, there are two options from which to choose.

A practitioner can try to work with the CEO. This might be reasonable if the practitioner has reason to hope that the CEO will be able and willing to listen to the

practitioner. If continuing to work with the CEO is the choice of the practitioner, then having someone with whom the practitioner can debrief what is happening becomes very important. We believe that continuing to work with the CEO solely for the money is not ethical practice. Another option is to stop working either with the CEO or with the whole organization.

There are a few reasons to stop a consulting job for a narcissistic CEO. First, working with a person who might have some psychological problems requires special training and a lot of patience. Second, a narcissistic CEO probably will not really listen to the practitioner, and there is little chance the CEO will change without some pressure or professional help. Third, if the practitioner does try to do a good job and challenge the CEO, the CEO may become hostile and vengeful and may blame the practitioner for failing the consulting job. The risks for the practitioner are the possibilities of having one’s reputation damaged, and/or feeling like a failure.

Internal OD consultants may not have the financial ability to quit their jobs. Their task is to stay psychologically healthy in an unsafe situation. Looking for other work is probably wise.

Working with Groups Impacted by Narcissistic CEOs

Working for narcissistic CEOs happens more often than one might think. Several non-peer reviewed journals, such as *Entrepreneur* or *Inc.* or blogs such as *Intrepid Mental Wellness* periodically publish articles about how to work with a narcissist boss. These articles tend to offer suggestions to help employees identify narcissistic CEOs and how to work with them. Some authors state that working with a narcissistic boss can be very difficult and suggest that an employee might need to work with a therapist to stay healthy (Hollman, 2022; Thompson, 2021).

According to Maccoby (2004), staying with the organization, led by a narcissistic boss, has a significant negative impact on employee’s morale and physical and mental health. Given the likelihood that sycophants will be promoted ahead of loyal

employees who choose not to cater to the CEO's whims, and the strong possibility that the organization will suffer financially, staying with the organization holds also risk to the employees' careers.

In our experience, we found that when the CEO is narcissistic, the organizational system replicates some of the unhealthy patterns and behaviors—blame shifting, information manipulation, etc. An organizational culture of blame and/or fear infantilizes people over time and makes them unable to act and discuss things openly. Some issues become undiscussable. The

to deal with narcissistic behaviors of the manager.

Taking into account the unhealthy behaviors that have been directed at the team, and the outcomes of these behaviors, the practitioner needs to shift the team's attention to choices available to the team. It is important to make a connection that the current choice of team's actions have been enabling and perpetuating unhealthy behaviors.

The team needs to understand that it is unreasonable to expect the manager to change. Reason and logic will not solve the

the situation, we learned that the manager's behavior was well known. However, the organization did nothing to help the manager, nor did anyone insist that he change his behavior.

After providing the basic conflict resolution concepts, much of the training was helping the team to respond to the manager's disrespectful behavior. The consultants' task became to help the team members regain perspective. Naming the issues allowed the team members to see both what has happened to them as a team, and what would be their responses to the situation in the light of new conflict management concepts. They were able to talk together about their thoughts and feelings about being in a highly disrespectful and emotionally destructive workplace.

In the end of the story, the manager was not helped or disciplined. He did not change which pushed employees to make their choices. Some employees, after gaining a new perspective, tolerated the manager's outbursts and did not take them personally. Others left the team without feeling guilty for "abandoning ship." Given the situation, we thought our consulting was successful.

How to Stay Healthy as an OD Practitioner

One of the challenges for an OD practitioner is how to process the thoughts and feelings that come in a difficult intervention. On one's own, the crazy-making of a narcissist can be confusing. We have found that the use of a peer or a therapist can be very helpful for sorting out feelings. As Schein (1999) wrote about process consultants, "I cannot be helpful if I cannot decipher what is going on in myself, in the situation, and in the client" (p. 243).

As the OD practitioners work through any case, there are questions to keep in mind, "*Who is the client? What is the duty to the client? What are my choices if the intervention does not go the planned way? What are ethical and economic implications?*" Once one is embroiled with a narcissist, it is too late to ask these questions. Our advice is to deal with such issues in contracting. Is the

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group members lose hope that the workplace will change.

Previously we wrote about narcissistic CEOs. Now we are moving on to people who report to narcissistic managers. What are the OD practitioners' objectives in working with a department or team led by a narcissist manager? What are the OD practitioners' objectives in working with a department or team led by a narcissist manager? If an OD practitioner uses Schein's (1999) process consultation model, then the OD practitioner's task is to help the group "see problems for themselves, and then think through their own remedies" (p. 18). This is the heart of action research—collecting data, helping people understand the data, and then helping people decide on the action plan and own this decision.

The practitioner may help the group to name the issue and to see its complexity. While a narcissistic manager may look like a problem, the actual issue is not the person, but the organizational system. To be specific, the issue is the reluctance and/or inability of the whole organizational system

problem. Team members have to choose their response to the situation, either staying in the job and remaining mentally and physically healthy, or leaving. Also, the responses to the situation may be collective and individual. Collectively the team members may choose to address the problems with the manager, the manager's boss, or the board of directors. Individually, people may choose to transfer, quit, or choose to accept the situation until they find other employment. Even if employees choose to stay, making the choice to stay can be beneficial to their self-esteem. The role of the OD practitioner is to help people identify and make their informed choices, not to tell them what to do.

Example. Once, we were asked to provide conflict resolution training for a group in the middle of an organization. The manager who hired us refused to attend the training, and as the first day progressed it became clear that the primary issue was the manager. He frequently screamed at employees and they were afraid to speak honestly with the manager or others. Later, when we spoke with an HR person about

client the CEO, or the organization? When and if should the practitioner talk with the board? When the contract is clear, then the ethical path is much easier to find.

Conclusion

According to the research, there are many highly narcissist CEO's out there, perhaps one in twenty, if not more. These CEOs damage their organizations financially and the employees emotionally. Narcissistic CEOs tend to be charming, until their self-centered needs are challenged. The tasks for the OD practitioner are a) to recognize narcissist behavior patterns, even though the practitioner is not qualified to make a psychological diagnosis, b) to decide if the CEO appears to be open to listening and changing, and c) to decide whether to end the intervention if the CEO appears unwilling to change.

The bottom line is this: highly narcissistic CEOs are not open to logic or reason as their goal is self-aggrandizement. There is little an OD practitioner can do to change the person or, as long as the CEO remains, the organization. Yet, the practitioner may help people gain a new perspective and decide what to do.

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Practicing OD in China by Engaging Metaphors for Change

By Jane Feng

Abstract

Metaphor has been a multi-disciplinary interest for decades. This article examines metaphors in the Chinese context. It elaborates on how metaphor operates in Chinese culture—in the form of root metaphor associated with traditional China, later as cultural metaphor in modern China. Based on my practice, it discusses engaging metaphors for change in coaching and consulting. By presenting my way of working with metaphor-based change interventions, I hope to provide some implications for change agents operating in different cultures.

Keywords: root metaphor, cultural metaphor, organization as family, engaging metaphor for change.

Since the 1970s, metaphor has been a subject of multi-disciplinary interest involving linguistics, philosophy, psychology, political science, education, and so on (see Gibbs, 2008; Ortony, 1993). Despite its cognitive origin, the metaphor-based change approach has become one of the important change interventions, both in diagnostic OD (Burke, 1992) and dialogic OD. Bob Marshak has contributed publications for decades on language-based change interventions by leveraging metaphors, storylines, word images, etc. (1993, 2002, 2004, 2009, 2013, 2015). However, the inquiry and research on engaging metaphors for change in a cultural context are relatively less explored.

This article examines the metaphor-based change approach in the Chinese context from a native Chinese OD practitioner’s perspective. It reflects my years of consulting and coaching experiences—internal and external, drawn from extensive literature review, including Western scholars investigating the ancient Chinese philosophers. I begin my discussion by proposing three premises to set the context.

Then, I attend to the metaphors in the Chinese setting by probing the root metaphor associated with traditional Chinese culture and its application in the form of cultural metaphor in contemporary China. Afterward, I present my thought on engaging metaphors for change based on my consulting/coaching practices, illustrated with two examples. In closing, I remark on some preconditions for this approach to function, and suggest implications for change agents operating in different cultures and interested in working this way.

Metaphor: Three Premises

Metaphor constructs the social reality, partly shaping people’s experiences of the world. Metaphor matters because it constitutes a fundamental part of people’s ordinary thought, reasoning, and imagination (Gibbs et al., 2004; Gibbs, 2008; Marshak, 2013, 2015). Metaphoric concepts have been widely utilized in everyday life (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, 1980b), for self (Metzner, 1998), organizations (Morgan, 1986), and for organizational change (Marshak, 1993).

Based on the extensive literature review, I have formulated the following three premises necessary for this article:

1. Metaphor conveys thought.

Lakoff argues, “The locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another” (1993, p. 203). It is primarily a matter of thought, not language, which plays a significant role in structuring everyday thinking, understanding, and reasoning that create our social, cultural, and psychological reality (Gibbs, 1994; Johnson, 1981; Kövecses, 2010a, 2010b; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, 1980b; Slingerland, 2011).

2. Metaphor is universal and cultural.

Metaphor is universal. Gibbs et al. (2004) claim that metaphor is fundamentally grounded in the embodiment since many of the source domains reflect significant patterns of bodily experiences (pp. 1189–1192). Metaphor is also cultural. Different cultures have different ways of comprehending experiences via conceptual metaphors unique to culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, p. 486; Kövecses, 2010a, p. 754).

3. Metaphors can be managed and leveraged for change.

Marshak has been advocating managing/leveraging language for change for decades. In his first article on metaphor, *Managing the Metaphors of Change*, he argues, “Any organizational change that requires people to reconceive the situation they face will require a change in the underlying and usually unexamined metaphors” (p. 55). This article was reprinted in *Reflections, The Sol Journal*, 2(3) (see www.solonline.org). The significance of metaphor for change is supported in the editorial comments from Edgar H. Schein and Karen Ayas (see p. 4).

Take the metaphor of *dream* for example. *American Dream* implies that America is truly a land of opportunity where anyone with self-discipline and talent can, through hard work, climb the ladder of success (Lakoff, 2016, p. 50). *Chinese Dream* has a different cultural meaning: “the great revival of the Chinese nation” (Gallelli, 2018; also see *The Economist*, May 4th, 2013). *Family*

is another frequently used metaphor, such as family-based moral systems in political discourse by Lakoff (2016). Some organizations claim to embrace a family culture, be it in China, Germany, or other countries.

Both metaphors of dream and family are universal as they are embedded in everyday life across cultures. However, the thoughts conveyed are culturally dependent and can be leveraged for change at the national or organizational levels. The latter will be discussed in a change intervention case shortly.

Building upon the three premises, I argue that metaphor conveys the thoughts of ancient Chinese philosophers, as exemplified by root metaphors. Metaphor is cultural since metaphoric expressions are culturally relevant. In contemporary China, they are leveraged for change. After providing the first section as a theoretical foundation, I will present a metaphor-based change approach based on my coaching and consulting experiences.

Metaphor in Traditional Chinese Culture: Root Metaphor

In ancient China, prominent philosophers conveyed their thoughts about cosmology and universal change substantially through metaphorical expressions. For example, in the two founding Taoist texts, the sage Lao Tzu (老子, c. 571–471 BCE) of the *Tao Te Ching* (道德经) and Chuang-tzu (also Zhuangzi 庄子, c. 369–286 BCE) of the *Zhuangzi*, presented their thinking with the extensive collection of analogies and metaphors to reveal their eminent wisdom.

In her book, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, Sarah Allan (1997) explores the root metaphor of early Chinese philosophical thoughts. She investigates the root metaphor’s foundational role in early Chinese philosophical discourse (Slingerland, 2011, p. 4). Allan, a scholar of ancient China, examines early Chinese classics, including the *Analects of Confucius* (论语) attributed to Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE) and his disciples, the Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching* (老子道德经, c. 571–471 BCE), the Mencius (孟子, 372–289 BCE), the Zhuangzi (庄子, 369–286 BCE), and the Xunzi (荀子, 310–219 BCE). As a result of her study,

Allan posits, “... the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphoric structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture” (p. 10). “What Lakoff and Johnson call the ‘metaphoric structure of the most fundamental concepts in a culture’ is what I call ‘root metaphor’” (p.13).

Traditional texts’ most fundamental Chinese values are expressed metaphorically to resemble the natural world. Thus, root metaphors mainly include water, plants, body, family, etc. (Allan, 1997; Munro, 1988). I will focus on one root metaphor, *family*, including its application in modern China.

In Confucianism, *family* is essential to the ethical and social order. It is perceived as a microcosm of society. Members have specific roles and duties based on their positions within the family, such as parents are expected to be loving and nurturing, and children are expected to be filial and obedient. Confucianism extends this metaphor to the whole society. According to the *Analects*, “... all within the four seas (the world) are brothers” (12:5, quoted in Chan, 1963, p. 39). Also in *Great Learning* (Da Xue, 大学), one of the Confucian classics of *Four Books*, it says, “In order rightly to govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family” (see <https://ctext.org/liji/da-xue>, Chapter 11). This statement manifests Confucianism’s central belief that maintaining family harmony is indispensable for stabilizing and prospering society.

The root metaphor of *family* remains pervasive in modern China, often adopted in leadership development. In Confucianism, leaders are like the parents of a family. They are expected to care for their extended families (companies) by cultivating their moral character. In China, extended family involves a kinship network with parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. It also involves relatives by marriage if applicable. In the workplace, engaging the family metaphor creates emotional bonding between colleagues by treating each other as family members. Up until now, many organizations still advocate a family culture, being local or multinational. Leveraging the family metaphor helps to build relationships,

interdependence, and obligation. It supports fostering a harmonious working environment for the organization to achieve its mission and vision.

I recalled a metaphor Bob Chin and Aili Chin engaged when introducing OD to China in the 1980s through a series of workshops. At that time, the participants were mainly top leaders from state-owned factories with a dual leadership structure: the *factory director* responsible for general business operations, and the *party secretary* accountable for the political agenda. Sometimes, this structure created tension due to the different orientations and priorities of the two leaders. To address the issue, Bob Chin, an American-born Chinese, proposed a family metaphor in the first China OD workshop in 1987. He referred the dual leaders to the parents: Father and Mother (Papa and Mama in Chinese). In a typical Chinese family, the father is regarded as the head of the household, responsible for setting rules and making decisions. The mother is seen as the nurturer and caregiver to maintain a harmonious family. Despite their different opinions, they share a common goal of nourishing and growing the family. The image was eye-opening for the participants. Before this workshop, they expressed frustrations about working with their counterparts for holding different thoughts since each role operates in its own duty. When perceiving their roles as the family's parents, they realized their diverse perspectives were apprehensible. After that, they began to see things for the family's good ahead of the individual authority. In the subsequent workshops, when different ideas surfaced, the factory directors and party secretaries said, "We are Papa and Mama, we will settle at home." Everyone laughed. With the family metaphor, Bob Chin and Aili Chin provided a new way for them to perceive their roles, which shaped their mindset toward building a healthy and harmonious organization.

Engaging Metaphors for Change in Coaching and Consulting

As discussed above, working with metaphor-based change interventions becomes

natural for me when practicing OD in China. Since metaphors are cultural, the clients spontaneously connect the metaphorical expressions with the implicit meanings, which is self-explanatory. Further, concerning the indirect nature of Chinese culture, metaphors are appropriate vehicles to address subtle and sensitive subjects to maintain harmony.

Working this way is aimed at provoking an alternative way of thinking when the client is stuck. It is not intended to show off your skills or upset the client. Based on my experiences, it is crucial to remember the following two tips that work both for internal and external OD workers:

1. **In sync with the client's context.** The client would feel connected with your suggested metaphor only when it could be meaningful and relevant in its context. For example, my previous company had a family culture, particularly in frontline operations. The workforce of local plants, dispersed across China, treated each other as brothers and sisters. Therefore, my team leveraged family in designing and delivering leadership programs to create a fun, caring, and nurturing learning environment. I still remember what a salesperson told us after a session: "I have been here for ten years. You made me feel at home."
2. **Use simple and everyday language.** When engaging metaphors in the coaching conversation or workplace, use simple, everyday language that shares a common metaphorical understanding. By doing so, you shun away from the potential misinterpretation or even confusion.

I once worked for a female manager, a wonderful lady who could be emotional sometimes. In our meetings with her, when she was happy, we usually had a good time; otherwise, we were likely to be challenged. So as a solution, the first thing in the morning, we learned to check with her secretary, "What is the weather today?" Using the weather as a metaphor, we managed the meetings successfully, with small interventions—such as starting with positive updates or rescheduling the meeting if she was in a bad mood. My manager

knew this, and the strategy worked well for both parties.

The above two tips also proved very helpful to me as an external. Upon the initial contact when I was unfamiliar with the client or the situation, I used to hold on to my intended metaphor to protect my credibility. Once I had developed trust with the client and had a hunch that the metaphor might be in sync with the client's context and could help start to reshape the client's mindset, I would test it to see if it worked. If not, alter the metaphor.

Let me illustrate with two mini-cases: one in internal consulting and another in external coaching.

Engaging Family Metaphor in Consulting

The consulting example came from my experience many years ago, related to a merger and acquisition case due to the business downturn (Feng, 2017). As an internal OD person in a US multinational company, I was invited to facilitate two change workshops involving senior leaders at the Director level and above. The merger and acquisition announcement triggered many emotional reactions across the company, including a sense of losing homes, worrying about job security, and so on. If not addressed appropriately, the change efforts might fail.

Knowing the company's family culture, I leveraged "*we are family*" as a critical change metaphor entailing two components: *emotional bonding and responsibility*. Before this change, the employees felt bonded to the company like an extended family. Many had worked there for over ten years, growing from grassroots to management roles. They felt hurt by the upcoming change, bursting into emotions such as anger, anxiety, upset, etc.

I started by leveraging the entailment that *family means emotional bonding*. The first workshop provided a safe container for people to publicly express their affection for the company and legitimated their reactions. The president began by acknowledging his connection with the company, a veteran of over 25 years and worked in China for more than five years. He told the

senior leaders that it was the most difficult decision he had to make in his career. His statement legitimated the many hidden emotions. To avoid the potential outburst of emotions, I quickly guided them into a preplanned break-out session of small groups in a warm setting, each with diverse participants (i.e., Headquarters leaders, Plant General Managers/HR Managers). In fact, some plant GMs had already anticipated the possible consequence of business downturns before the change announcement but found it hard to accept the cut off of the family-like bond with the company. So, in the small groups, they had the opportunity to release their emotions, and also attended to other viewpoints. By the time they convened in the big group, the senior leaders were ready to accept the rational side of the change.

In the second workshop, it was appropriate to leverage another entailment, *family implies the responsibility*, to address the responsibility aspect of a family. The leaders began to discuss the change implications—such as taking care of their people, managing the business partners, and the resulting communication, business transactions, execution, etc. The workshop provided a family-like setting where people felt open to discuss the change implementations by adding area-specific amendments, although some remained sad. Situating the problematic change in a family context helped make me think that the senior leaders felt attached and accountable. The workshops ended successfully. Despite all the challenges, the change case was closed smoothly.

This example manifests the efficacy of *family* metaphor when in sync with the company's context since its cultural implications were well understood by both local employees and Western executives working in China for many years. The family metaphor offered a natural setting to conduct the change workshops. Indeed, the result spoke for itself.

Engaging Cultural Metaphors in Coaching

Recently, a friend of mine invited me to coach her daughter Lucy. Lucy has

been working in a consulting firm as a researcher for two years after graduation. Bored with her current job, she complained to her parents for not helping her, regardless of their respective good careers in management and finance. Her parents chose these two professions in the mid-1980s to capture the opportunities along with China's opening. Lucy majors in mathematics in her undergraduate study at her own wish. Below is a short conversation.

JANE: Tell me why you complained about your parents.

LUCY: They are pretty successful but didn't provide me with any career advice.

JANE: What do you want from them?

LUCY: Well, they can give me some suggestions or even introduce me to their friends' companies, something like that.

JANE: What did they say seeing you unhappy?

LUCY: They said, "China is evolving. What was good for us years ago may not be good for you years later. And, we don't have the latest knowledge and social network that might be helpful to you. You have to find your own career that would last decades of your life."

JANE: They are wise.

LUCY: They also told me their professions became stagnant after decades of growth. Their friends' businesses are stuck too.

JANE: It looks like their professions' 红利 (premium) is decreasing.

LUCY: Yes, but I rather follow their careers, better than my current job.

JANE: Well, it might be 鸡肋 (chicken ribs), not tasting, but a pity to discard.

LUCY: Probably (smiling).

The evoked cultural metaphors and meanings proved telling and opened doors for change. In the moment, she smiled recognizing her limiting mindset. During the follow-up conversation, she told me she was considering pursuing a master's degree in computer science since it looked like a more promising career, and her mathematics education might serve as a good foundation. Her mother was pleased

to see her daughter become more proactive and positive.

In reflection, I blurted out the metaphor of 红利 (premium) and 鸡肋 (chicken ribs) unconsciously. Simple and in everyday language, they conveyed the same meanings for both of us. 红利 (premium), a frequently used metaphor implying something extraordinary, mapped well to her parents' professional outlook. 鸡肋 (chicken ribs), generally associated with a common phrase—食之无味，弃之可惜: *eating without taste is a pity to discard*, which revealed the current situation Lucy encountered. Referring to the two metaphors, Lucy realized her limiting mindset of relying on her parents for her career advancement. In this way, I helped Lucy to get "out-of-box" and discovered a new possibility.

Briefly then, applying a metaphor-based change approach requires a good understanding of the client's context and the metaphors' cultural interpretations. In the above examples, if the client did not embrace a family culture, or was not keen on the suggested cultural metaphors, this approach might not work.

Closing Comments

The metaphor-based change approach in the cultural context remains an area of potential. In my view, the efficacy of this way of working depends on the change agent's preference, the client's cultural context, and the change situation. Although there are many change approaches—as we say in China, *"every way leads to Roma,"* my practice suggests that metaphors, if used in a cultural setting, have the possibility to bring effective change results. By writing this article, I hope to provide some implications for change agents operating in a different culture, being culturally savvy, and willing to experiment.

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