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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

I explore how trauma becomes interwoven into the daily operations and the institutional mission of Baker Industries, a workforce development nonprofit in southeastern Pennsylvania which employs hard-to-employ adults. In a society short on empathy and structural support for some of the most vulnerable populations, Baker Industries offers full-time employment as well as life-skills training and support for adults with physical and cognitive disabilities, mental illnesses, substance abuse issues, criminal records, and home insecurity. Assumed among every participant, trauma becomes a resource for recognition and economic security. I illustrate how trauma saturates the institutional and routine practices of staff and participants, a fact essential to the foundation and reputation of the organization itself.

Keywords: Trauma, Workforce Development, Disability, Thematization, Vulnerability, Resource.

I. Introduction

Baker Industries is a workforce development nonprofit in urban and suburban Pennsylvania that employs approximately 200 workers with a variety of challenges, including

home insecurity, physical and cognitive disabilities, mental illness, criminal records, and previous substance abuse. With warehouses in two locations in the Philadelphia area—North Philadelphia and Malvern in the western suburbs—Baker Industries offers participants full-time employment through jobs such as bulk mailings, packaging, and machine assembly, along with life skills workshops, resume building, and emotional support, all in an effort to help participants move forward in their lives and onto more permanent jobs. Since 1980, 10,000 people have participated in Baker’s program. Baker is the only workforce development organization of its kind in the region which not only offers participants a real wage, but also employs not one but four segments of vulnerable populations in the same program.

In this paper, I argue that trauma is deeply built into Baker’s schematic orientation. Once participants are implicitly labeled as “trauma survivors,” trauma becomes a resource that enables individuals to gain visibility and economic security through inclusion in the Baker work program. This organization’s guiding mission statement declares that “Baker Industries recognizes, respects, and appreciates the differences in all people” (“About Us”). As a “trauma informed institution,” Baker is cognizant of the fact that the majority of its participants have experienced trauma in their lives; staff are Mental Health First Aid certified and participate in workshops on trauma led by an independently-contracted social worker (“Center for Substance Abuse Treatment”). People from vastly different backgrounds come to Baker for various reasons, where their unique challenges are respected, understood, and embraced.

II. Methodology

In a society that often ignores, stigmatizes, and underserves vulnerable populations, I ask how, at this nonprofit, trauma and care are understood to be intertwined with respect to diversity and labor. How do the ways in which the concept of trauma circulates at Baker Industries push

back on conventional conceptions of trauma? To what extent is Baker seen by staff, participants, and community members as its own microcosm of acceptance and empathy toward survivors of trauma? How does trauma move through and past the institutional context at Baker? When participants enter this working world, does their view of their own trauma change?

I began my research with an interest in how participants and staff think about and work with notions of trauma. As they shrink-wrapped ointment creams, packaged rubber gloves, and assembled cardboard candy boxes, participants and I talked about their favorite music, where they grew up, their interests, and their goals. I attended multiple trauma training and psychoeducational workshops, in which participants, either all together or in small groups of four, discussed topics ranging from traumatic pasts to making wise decisions to emotional self-regulation. I participated in celebratory events, such as an Independence Day cookout, as well as womens' support group meetings and activities.

I predicted that my observations from talking with participants about their experiences at Baker would be most fruitful in understanding how trauma is rendered significant at this organization. Yet, my methodological focus shifted from the personal and past experiences of participants to the daily, cognitive, and linguistic practices of staff surrounding trauma. This research is not focused on how the trauma of individuals at Baker Industries moves and circulates within the respective environment, but rather how the institutional mission of Baker becomes saturated with trauma as a category which is deeply tethered to notions of empathy and difference.

III. Research Findings

Before I began interviewing staff members about trauma at Baker, I approached this term with apprehension. I did not quite understand how or why such a capacious, fraught term—

applied both to everyday annoyances and sexual assault, as well as the consequences of genocide—could function as such a stabilizing force for the mission of an institution with such great diversity. I now understand that at Baker, trauma is not simply embedded in daily and institutional operations; it also forms a cohesive fabric which connects the diverse experiences of participants and occupies a space which, without it, exists in a state of precarity. The ways in which trauma is understood, constructed, and mobilized in daily practice reveal a certain thematization of trauma which eases the paradoxical tension surrounding the pernicious problem by which one cannot merely talk about difference—of challenge, of disability, of background—without inevitably reinstating and reanimating it. Thus, the thematization of trauma itself is what allows for Baker to operate in a stable manner.

The narrative of trauma becomes structured by the work habits of participants and staff, by specific workshops geared toward recovery, and by the empathetic environment overall. Trauma allows for both difference and the erasure of difference as it moves through the ecology of Baker. The thematization of trauma stems firstly from the fact that because every participant fits into at least one segment of the four “vulnerable” populations which Baker serves, trauma is assumed among essentially all participants without any formal diagnosis or evaluation. The disabilities and substance abuse challenges which would be disqualifying in the private sector are qualifying at Baker —“You got a criminal record? Perfect! You got a disability? Qualified!” says Rich, the president. In fact, participants wield the agency to declare their own trauma and direct their own healing journey with the assistance of the crisis counselor and all of the trauma-trained staff members.

Secondly, the thematization of trauma at Baker is, in part, predicated on the capaciousness of the term, which allows two vastly different places to operate under the same

institutional umbrella. The Philadelphia location is an expansive one-level warehouse that echoes with lively Latin pop tunes. Participants on parole or probation, with substance abuse issues, or challenged with home insecurity, work at their assigned jobs. On the other hand, at the Malvern location, music is only played in the afternoon, where participants, the majority of whom are challenged with physical and mental disabilities, sit at neatly organized tables. For participants on one “track,” Baker offers transitional employment that will last approximately a year until better employment is secured. On the other “track,” Baker offers long-term employment for individuals who are, due to disability or challenge, unable to move onto better employment. The numerous psychoeducational, life-skills, and creative expression workshops are the same at both locations and for most participants. During a workshop on making wise decisions and identifying emotions, a participant who was recently released from prison after serving 50 years, who will most likely move on from Baker, was sitting next to a long-term participant with a physical disability. Although from two exceedingly different backgrounds and challenges, these two individuals sat side by side, learning about the same “Wheel of Feelings,” the same mindfulness strategies, and the same skills to understand and cope with their trauma.

Thirdly, the “trauma-informed” label which Baker utilizes also reinforces the narrative and schematic power of trauma in the general work habits and atmosphere at Baker. Baker was at the forefront of this trendy label, which has gained traction within the past few years among care-driven and clinical organizations (Becker-Blease, 2017). The label functions in this particular space as a signifier that Baker not only acknowledges the role that trauma plays in the lives of participants, but also continuously aims to be more sensitive to issues relating to trauma. Since becoming “trauma- informed” in 2017, a process requiring no regulatory or legal formalities or qualifications, Baker has instituted ongoing trauma training for staff members led

by independent contractor Laura Hinds. Jill, senior production manager at the Malvern location who has been at Baker for over 18 years, characterized this initial training as “a missing piece of the puzzle.” She added,

It helped me put in perspective where I need to help and where I need to pull back, read a situation, and guide [participants] through what they are struggling with. Baker has come a long way. When I first started here, we basically just took work that the people could do. We took anything just to have work. There weren't any programs, there wasn't any real support other than the Mr. And Mrs. Bakers, the founding couple.

Another staff member asserted that “before I didn't really have much empathy for people because I am a cynic. If there is an easy way to do something, they will do it and I have to temper that.” However, he explained that Hind's trainings on trauma have allowed him to see that an emotional outburst may be caused by something completely unrelated to the issue at hand. Additionally, since becoming “trauma-informed,” Baker has instituted “morning huddles,” whereby participants come together each morning to discuss the work plans of the day and to share anything that is personally relevant to them at the time; at the Malvern location, whoever is holding the “talking stick” has the floor to briefly share what they would like and receive peer support.

Although there are general aspects which construct the “trauma-informed” label across companies and organizations—including staff psychoeducation, peer support, etc.—Baker also fulfills this title in another way. Several of its staff members were once participants who experienced trauma in their pasts. Lisa, senior production manager in Philadelphia, expressed,

I come from a background where I was physically abused by many and I don't mind sharing it. I've done a lot of counseling personally to get to a place where it does not

define me. I have a knapsack and I reach into that knapsack and the fact that I can pull out something that connects to people is very helpful, and I find the participants and staff respect that. The fact that staff can share our experiences with participants in a safe environment, I think that is what makes us certified to be able to handle trauma. To watch participants fall back into drugs or the streets and trying to reel them in, that is the most challenging. It feels like, ‘How could I have fixed that? What did I do wrong? I saw it coming—did I do enough?’ I’ve gotten to the point where I’ve gone to a block to pick up a gentleman—maybe not the smartest—but if I have saved that gentleman, then I have done my job.

Staff are personally invested in the recovery journeys of participants, who trust people like Lisa partly because of their past experience with trauma. In the social ecology at Baker, the thematization of trauma is predicated upon the assumption of trauma, the existence of two distinct locations under one institutional umbrella, and the importance of the “trauma-informed” status to the mission of Baker. And it is this thematization which allows dichotomous understandings of difference to coexist.

The broadness of trauma as a category as well as its pervasiveness in the environment and mission aids staff in making sense of the diverse social fibers, experiences, backgrounds, and temporalities of recovery at Baker. Yet trauma is also situated at the intersection of contradictory notions surrounding difference itself. In Baker’s mission statement, motivational mantras, and staff opinions about the company, difference emerges as something that is both recognized and suppressed on the institutional level. According to Rich, “We try to celebrate folks differences and experiences, sharing personally through huddles and celebration events. We are defining ourselves increasingly as a society by our diversity, and in building this layered view, we are

constantly evolving how we react to different people's situations." Lisa stated that "We are all an orchestra, we are a band, we are whatever we want to be, and if my drummer isn't here, then something for the rest of us is missing." On the other hand, Turk, the past president and a current board member, spoke differently about this subject when he told me that "Baker is truly inclusive in recognizing differences. We don't recognize differences. There is no black, blue, green, purple, disabled. Everyone is treated the same way with incredible empathy and care, and it's amazing how some of the other participants pitch in to resolve situations when others are struggling." The looming tension that emerges from staff members surrounding difference is not limited to linguistic properties, but also behavioral and structural ones. Multiple staff members highlighted the uniqueness of the space, noting that staff members work under the same roof as the people they serve. They emphasized that this lack of hierarchy within the buildings themselves reflects the unity and equality between staff and participants. However, Jill expressed that sometimes staff "treat participants like children," particularly when handling difficult situations and emotions. These examples represent some of the ways in which difference, between staff and participants, is symbolically and physically marked at Baker. Additionally, although staff members' understandings of trauma are guided by the same definition for all four segments of vulnerable populations, some trauma trainings among staff have been geared toward particular groups, such as a training program devoted to understanding trauma for those with criminal records.

IV. Discussion

I have asked how trauma, which is saturated within virtually every aspect of Baker's organization, is characterized in such a way that it can mediate this tension between the recognition and the erasure of difference, bridging these linguistic and mentality-based

inconsistencies under one cohesive institutional fabric. As Erica James writes in the context of Haiti post-military rule, trauma becomes a commodity, a type of “labor to package,” in a larger economy of suffering in which “viktims” of terror utilize performances of trauma as leverage in their pursuit of monetary benefits and public recognition (James, 2009). At Baker, once a participant passes the threshold of becoming qualified through state legally determined vulnerability, the label of trauma becomes a resource. Each person’s trauma—considered equivalent to others’ trauma—qualifies them for inclusion in the social community at Baker and the economic benefits that inclusion incurs. Despite extreme differences in personal experiences of trauma, the pervasiveness of trauma as a label garners not only empathy, but also multiple forms of visibility. This recognition takes the form of stable employment, the fostering of a sense of community, the ability to participate, a legitimate voice to be heard, a respected position to speak. Thus, trauma as a label allows for a universalization of the individual traumatic experiences of the workers, by which the fact that an individual can make a claim to trauma is what enables them to access this program and its benefits.

In addition to the fact that participants are able to lead their own healing journeys, the very notion that trauma pervades the space functions powerfully to instill empathy among participants. According to Turk, “we have these disparate, vulnerable adult populations with their own set of unique problems. When they realize the problems of this other unique population, there is this wonderful interaction that takes place.” The ensuing “caring community” that develops out of these interactions is inextricably linked to the structure of the building and the institutional frameworks predicated on trauma and diversity. Trauma not only qualifies individual participants at Baker; it also qualifies Baker itself as a worthwhile, united, service-based company in the close and wider community of workforce development nonprofits and

social work. Thus, trauma operates as a resource as it harmonizes and settles the cognitive movements of staff regarding paradoxical notions of difference by presenting the company with an overarching mission label to latch onto. In talking and even thinking about difference, staff are able to sinuously maneuver through the subtle yet insidious discrepancies by fast-tracking to the safe and trendy common ground presented by trauma as a label and a schema.

V. Summary and Conclusions

Ultimately, the portrait of trauma at Baker sustains the specific structuring of work, communication, and cognitive habits as well as mission-driven unity. Participants are given the opportunity to have a voice, to practice empathy towards others, and to guide their own treatment path by virtue of not only their personal trauma, but also the model of trauma at an institutional level. Formal, objective trauma science and diagnoses have no social currency at Baker because the terminology of trauma within the institution operates as the prerogative of both individual participants' journeys and the nonprofit's image to the larger community of organizations serving vulnerable populations. The malleability and inherent capaciousness of trauma allow it to become a strategic mechanism for navigating and bridging the intellectual, thematic inconsistencies which inevitably emerge in a space of great transition and unmistakable diversity.

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