



INCORPORATING PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE INTO FATHERHOOD RESEARCH

By Dara Lewis | SEPTEMBER 2023

INTRODUCTION

Many fathers, including those who participate in fatherhood programs, have experienced trauma that can have lasting negative effects on how they think, feel, behave, and relate to themselves and others. This can impact many areas of their lives including how they parent, their relationships with their children and co-parent, and other personal or work relationships.¹

The benefits of using a trauma-informed (TI) approach in programs that serve fathers have been well documented.² But the quality of the research about fatherhood programs and the experiences of study participants can also be improved by incorporating TI knowledge and principles into the research design.³ A TI approach to fatherhood research, from conceptualization to dissemination, assumes that anyone involved in the process (including study participants, program staff members, researchers, and others) may have experienced trauma and ensures that precautions are taken to avoid causing additional trauma to everyone involved. By grounding their work in a culturally responsive TI approach, researchers can develop a deeper understanding of the particular experiences, perspectives, and needs of fathers.⁴

This brief explores ways to apply a broad TI framework to research focused on fathers and fatherhood programs and looks at the benefits for researcher-participant interactions throughout the research process.

WHY FATHERHOOD RESEARCHERS SHOULD BE THINKING ABOUT TRAUMA

Many fatherhood program participants come from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities that are disproportionately exposed to and affected by trauma.⁵ Fathers may have experienced personal trauma from physically harmful, emotionally harmful, or life-threatening events or circumstances (for example, abuse, neglect, accidents, serious illness,

community violence, or military service). This trauma can have lasting effects on an individual's physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being.⁶ Fathers, families, and communities can also experience forms of collective trauma.⁷

Collective trauma can occur when large numbers of people are affected directly or indirectly by the same traumatic event (for example, the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001; the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in 2020; or a school shooting incident). Historical trauma (for example, from slavery, genocide, or the Holocaust) is a form of collective trauma experienced over generations.

There are many reasons to consider using a TI approach when conducting fatherhood research.

- Taking a TI approach when conducting research aligns with researchers' ethical obligations to protect human subjects from harm.
- Researchers often ask fathers deeply personal and difficult questions (whether through a self-guided survey or a facilitated interview) that can cause a heightened emotional response.
- Knowing the signs and symptoms of trauma can help researchers recognize trauma responses when engaging fathers, families, and communities.
- Researchers may also have experienced trauma themselves and can be affected by that while conducting research.
- Applying TI principles to research practices may help researchers minimize the risk of inadvertently causing additional trauma to fathers and to themselves. It may also help researchers respond appropriately to trauma responses. For example, a researcher might pause to allow a father to self-regulate if a question triggers an emotional response. The researcher might also work closely with program staff after an interview to make sure that the interviewee receives the support he needs.

APPLYING THE “FOUR Rs” OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE APPROACH

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has developed a concept of trauma-informed care that is based on four key assumptions.⁸ These “four Rs” can help researchers and others shift mindsets away from wondering “What’s wrong with them [fathers/research participants]?” to trying to understand “What happened to them?”

- **REALIZE** the widespread impact of trauma.
- **RECOGNIZE** the signs and symptoms of trauma in fathers and in oneself.

- **RESPOND** by integrating knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures, and research practices.
- **RESIST** retraumatizing fathers and oneself.

TRANSLATING TRAUMA-INFORMED PRINCIPLES INTO RESEARCH PRACTICES

SAMHSA has also identified six principles of TI care that researchers can consider throughout the research process:

- **SAFETY.** Help participants feel physically and psychologically safe.
- **TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSPARENCY.** Inform participants about all aspects of the research process to help develop a sense of trust. For example, discuss the content of survey questions in general terms before administering the questionnaire.
- **EMPOWERMENT, VOICE, AND CHOICE.** Recognize, value, and validate fathers' strengths and perspectives.
- **COLLABORATION.** Acknowledge power differences between fathers and researchers and the opportunity to learn together and collaborate.
- **CULTURAL CONTEXT.** Recognize the social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of fathers' lives and avoid using stereotypes and biases based on these factors. Be particularly aware of how these factors may have exposed some fathers to traumatic experiences.
- **PEER SUPPORT AND MUTUAL SELF-HELP.** Support fathers' recovery and healing by providing them with opportunities to connect with others who have had similar experiences. For example, offer referrals to support groups and incorporate research methods such as focus groups or other group-based research activities.

GUIDING QUESTIONS TO HELP RESEARCHERS AT EACH STAGE OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The safety of fathers should be considered throughout the study process: when selecting research participants, when determining where and how data will be collected, and when deciding how data and research findings will be reported to ensure confidentiality. Table 1 provides sample questions and suggestions to guide researchers at each step along the way. TI principles identified above are bolded throughout the table.

Table 1. Guiding Questions Tool for Researchers

RESEARCH STAGE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	WHAT YOU CAN DO
PRE-STUDY	How well can you identify the signs and symptoms of trauma in yourself and in others?	Get training on trauma and trauma responses. Look for any signs of anger or irritability, changes in mood, dissociation, or anxiety.
	What social, cultural, economic, and historical factors may have had an impact on the participants in the program being studied?	Do your homework on the contexts in which the fathers/fatherhood program are being studied. Talk to fathers and practitioners. Review relevant literature and data.
STUDY DESIGN	Are there any potential threats posed by the research setting, procedures, or protocol, to your or the participants’ physical or psychological safety ? Are there interviewer characteristics that should be considered?	Make sure that the setting feels safe for the fathers (and for you). Be aware of and responsive to any interviewer characteristics that could remind fathers of traumatic experiences. For example, a father who has experienced sexual violence with a female co-parent might have difficulty discussing that experience with a female interviewer.
	How is collaboration between the participants and those directly or indirectly involved with the research being supported?	Codevelop or get feedback on research methods and instruments with those who may be affected by the research (fathers, staff, and other community members).
INFORMED CONSENT	How well do participants understand the research and what is being asked of them before consenting to participate (transparency)?	Be clear about the kinds of questions that will be asked. Provide a copy of the survey instrument or sample questions for participants to review prior to verbal consent.
	Do participants feel pressured or coerced to participate (empowerment, voice, choice)?	Talk through the consent form using language that is understandable and define complicated terms used in the document. For example, if the consent form talks about a “certificate of confidentiality,” tell fathers that this is a special document that allows you to keep their information confidential even if there is a court subpoena. Remind fathers that their participation is voluntary.

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Table 1 (continued)

RESEARCH STAGE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	WHAT YOU CAN DO
INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT	Are questions worded in a way that could trigger emotional responses (safety)?	Be mindful of wording that can be emotionally charged such as “rape,” “abuse,” or “victim.”
	How has the psychological safety of participants been accounted for in the ordering of sensitive questions?	Consider when to pose sensitive questions to fathers. For instance, include more challenging questions at the beginning of a survey, before a father becomes fatigued, and put interview questions that may be more sensitive in nature in the middle, to allow the interviewer time to build rapport and a sense of trust first.
DATA COLLECTION	To what extent do research participants have autonomy and agency in the research process (empowerment, voice, and choice)?	Include a “decline to answer” or “prefer not to say” option for every question. Ask permission before asking sensitive questions and remind fathers that they can skip questions that create too much discomfort.
	How are you supporting participants’ emotional and behavioral regulation to support their sense of safety and trust ?	Do multiple check-ins with fathers and any others involved in the research process to assess their stress and discomfort levels, offer breaks, and end an interview earlier than planned if necessary.
AFTER DATA COLLECTION	How can I mitigate stress responses (safety, trust, and transparency)?	<p>Debrief with fathers after surveys and interviews and acknowledge the challenging nature of the questions asked. Also debrief with project staff members, as secondary trauma could occur with repeated exposure to difficult conversations.</p> <p>Once fathers have shared their personal information and stories, there may be a concern about how it will be used. Explain the dissemination plans to ensure a sense of transparency and trust in reporting the information they’ve shared.</p>

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Table 1 (continued)

RESEARCH STAGE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	WHAT YOU CAN DO
AFTER DATA COLLECTION (continued)	What resources are available if participants are triggered emotionally and experience a trauma reaction (Empowerment, safety, trust)?	Provide a resource referral list, facilitate a warm handoff to community resources, and alert fatherhood program staff.

SOURCE: Table content based on Laura Voith, Tyrone Hamler, Meredith Francis, Hyunjune Lee, and Amy Korsch-Williams, “Using a Trauma-Informed, Socially Just Research Framework with Marginalized Populations: Practices and Barriers to Implementation,” *Social Work Research* 44, 3 (2020): 169-181; and Nora Johnson, “Trauma Informed Evaluation: Tip Sheet for Collecting Information” (Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2016), website: <https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/trauma-informed-evaluation-tip-sheet-collecting-information>.

DEVELOPING CONSISTENT TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

Trauma-informed research starts with the researcher.⁹ It is important for researchers to understand what trauma is, how it can manifest in researcher-participant interactions, and how to incorporate that knowledge into the research practice.

- **KNOW YOURSELF.** Know your own traumas and triggers.
- **SET THE STAGE FOR AN INTERVIEW OR SURVEY.** Be aware of your own emotional and behavioral responses and how to regulate your reactions. **During the interview or survey,** be aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (tone of voice, expression, and general affect).
- **BE PRESENT.** Be aware of fathers’ emotional and behavioral regulation.
- **BE PATIENT AND NONJUDGMENTAL.** Be aware of how your body language and responses come across to fathers. Calmness is important for making them feel at ease.
- **ENGAGE IN EMPATHETIC LISTENING.** Listen to what fathers are saying but also be aware of subtle emotional responses to what they are saying.
- **SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE.** Share information and tools with other researchers and community partners to raise awareness about applying a TI approach.

- **CREATE RESEARCH TEAMS, PROCEDURES, AND ENVIRONMENTS THAT DRAW ON TI PRINCIPLES** (such as safety and trustworthiness).
- **KEEP LEARNING** about trauma.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

- Practical Strategies for Applying Trauma-Informed Approaches into Fatherhood Programs is a brief that provides information and resources designed to support trauma-informed practices. [NOTE TO OFA: LINK TO BE ADDED BEFORE PUBLICATION]
- [Trauma-Informed Approaches and Awareness for Programs Working with Fathers](#) is a brief that offers tips and considerations for programs that serve fathers.
- [Understanding Trauma-Informed Programming](#) is a webinar discussion about fathers and mental health.
- [Let's Talk About Mental Health](#) is a blog post about how fatherhood programs can encourage fathers to talk about mental health and promote their overall health.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

- SAMHSA's [National Center for Trauma-Informed Care](#) provides resources including:
 - [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#) is a paper that discusses the nature and impact of trauma and offers a framework for how an organization, system, or service sector can become trauma-informed.

The Trauma Informed Care (TIC) Project

- The [TIC website](#) includes links to webinars, videos, and other helpful resources for learning about becoming “trauma-informed.”

Notes and References

1. Jill Levenson, "Trauma-Informed Social Work Practice," *Social Work* 62, 2 (2017): 105-113.
2. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, "Trauma-Informed (TI) Approaches in Programs Serving Fathers" (Dunwoody, GA: National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2018).
3. Laura Voith, Tyrone Hamler, Meredith Francis, Hyunjune Lee, and Amy Korsch-Williams, "Using a Trauma-Informed, Socially Just Research Framework with Marginalized Populations: Practices and Barriers to Implementation," *Social Work Research* 44, 3 (2020): 169-181.
4. Lisa A. Henshaw, "Building Trauma-Informed Approaches in Higher Education," *Behavioral Sciences* 12, 10 (2022): 368.
5. Simran Chaudry, Kimberly Zweig, Preetha Hebbar, Sonia Angell and Ashwin Vasan, "Trauma-Informed Care: A Strategy to Improve Primary Healthcare Engagement for Persons with Criminal Justice System Involvement," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 34, 6 (2019): 1048-1052; Peter Cronholm, Christine Forke, Roy Wade, Megan H. Bair-Merrit, Martha Davis, Mary Harkins-Schwartz, Lee Pachter, and Joel Fein, "Adverse Childhood Experiences: Expanding the Concept of Adversity," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 49, 3 (2015): 354-61.
6. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).
7. Carolyn Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing* (New York: Good Books Publishing, 2020).
8. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.
9. Martha Brown, "Trauma-Informed Eval Week: Principles of Trauma-Informed Evaluation," *AEA365 (blog)*, American Evaluation Association, January (<https://aea365.org/blog/trauma-informed-eval-week-principles-of-trauma-informed-evaluation-by-martha-brown/>, 2021).

This brief was developed by Dara Lewis, MDRC, and reviewed by Nigel Vann, Azaliah Israel and Andrew Freeberg on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

Suggested citation: Lewis, Dara. 2023. "Incorporating Principles of Trauma-Informed Care in Fatherhood Research." Dunwoody, Georgia: [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#).