

Institutional Injustice: An Under-explored Form of Trauma

Jenna Land & Sherry Hamby

Department of Psychology, Sewanee: The University of the South

Abstract:

Objective: This study aims to explore institutional, systemic, and interpersonal injustices found in semi-structured interviews conducted in rural Appalachia. **Method:** Interviews from a previous study were reviewed for institutional and interpersonal injustices in the lives of community members living in rural Appalachia. Interviewees that were 21 and older were eligible. This project included a review of 90 interviews. A grounded theory approach was used to identify themes. **Results:** Reports of traumatic events were grouped broadly into interpersonal and institutional traumas. The interpersonal group consisted of incidents of abuse and family issues. Institutional injustices were grouped into 3 categories. Systemic included injustices related to a system, for example foster care or health care. Professional injustices included malfeasance of health care providers, employers, or other professionals. Corporate were related to bad behaviors of businesses. **Discussion:** The qualitative data suggest that these areas of injustice are common and neglected forms of trauma. The results collected in this study would be important to consider for future research.

Methodology:

Participants- The sample consisted of 90 participants (63.3 % female). The participants average age was 37.9 years, ages ranging from 21 to 69 years. For the purpose of this study, only participants 21 and older were used. The sample included 90% of participants were European American/White. Participants were primarily from rural communities. **Procedure:** Participants completed semi-structure qualitative interviews. They were asked to explain moments in their life that are considered high, low and turning points, along with a positive and not so positive behavior. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were coded using grounded theory analysis, collecting information from the interviews on institutional injustices: Professional, Corporate, and Systemic injustices. Interpersonal injustices and natural disasters were noted but were not in the scope of the research question of this study.

Results: Sample Quotes for Each Institutional Injustice Category

Professional:

“...15 years ago my wife was on a, uh, birth control and she had to take antibiotics for something, and the doctor didn’t say that it would eliminate the birth control pills, so she got pregnant with twin girls and so we jumped from 3 to 5 pretty quick...” – 40-year-old male

“.... I hated being at my job. They disrespected me this one year during a Jewish holiday when I was actually going for Rosh Hashanah and they forced me to come home just to pick up something from the office and bring it to their home. Instead of going and doing it themselves. I was an hour and a half away...” – 34-year-old male

Corporate:

“...I’m waiting on a lawsuit now from where, my birth control’s what they said caused my stroke. So, I’m only thirty-one, and I had them when I was twenty-seven. I had two strokes, so I was up in the hospital in Saint Thomas for two weeks with two small babies at home.” – 31-year-old female

Systemic:

“...Like, I want to go back to work. I want to work for my kids. I want them to have stuff like I had, but I’m disabled now, and I just trying to find a job. Like, they allow me to work twenty hours a week on disability, and that’s just not nothing, but I’m trying to find one now because I need it.” - 31-year-old female

Categories of Institutional Injustices:

Professional Injustices

- Instances when an employer, health care provider, professor, or someone in authority does something wrong related to their professional role.

Corporate Injustices

- These don’t involve direct interactions with victim but involve situations when using a company’s products leads to harm.

Systemic Injustices

- These are manifestations of “the system is rigged”—people experiencing harm because the system is too slow or indifferent or set up in a way that will inevitably harm many people.

Conclusion:

- Participants were not specifically asked about their institutional injustices in their interviews, but nonetheless mentions were common. 45.5 % of the interviews included a mention of an institutional injustice.
- This is a new concept that has limited research. This study is the beginning for understanding the impact of institutional injustices.
- Future research on poly-victimization should incorporate assessments on institutional injustice to better capture the full burden of trauma.

Introduction:

- The experience of multiple types of trauma is known as poly-victimization (Hamby, et al., 2018).
- Institutional betrayal is associated with social harm and other systemic injustices (Smith & Freyd, 2014).
- Research on institutional injustices is uncommon but may add to the burden of trauma. The goal of this study was to expand on this concept by analyzing qualitative interviews.

References:

- Hamby, S., Taylor, E., Jones, L., Mitchell, K. J., Turner, H. A., & Newlin, C. (2018). From poly-victimization to poly-strengths: Understanding the web of violence can transform research on youth violence and illuminate the path to prevention and resilience. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(5), 719–739. doi: 10.1177/0886260517744847
- Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2014). Institutional betrayal. *American Psychologist*, 69(6), 575–587. doi: 10.1037/a0037564