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Survivors of Complex Trauma as Adult Online Learners

Hilary Schmidt iD
Open Learning
Thompson Rivers University

Correspondence:

Hilary Schmidt
Open Learning, Thompson Rivers University
Email: hschmidt [at] tru.ca

Abstract

Complex trauma is both a product and a source of significant multidimensional inequality, including profound disruption to survivors' educational trajectories. Nonetheless, educational researchers have not previously engaged with adult survivors who study online, contradicting the key principle of collaboration within a trauma-informed approach. This qualitative instrumental collective case study explored how adults with a history of complex trauma experience postsecondary open/online learning. Findings included participants' struggles with executive functioning, challenges regulating emotion and dealing with a heightened perception of threat, re-experiencing trauma, negative beliefs about the self, and difficulties navigating relationships. These trauma impacts affected not only participants' learning and course experience, but also their experience of applying, registering, and accessing financial aid. Nonetheless, participants are demonstrably skilled in managing the impacts of their trauma and are driven to learn, placing the highest intrinsic value on education. Top priorities for the implementation of trauma-informed educational practices identified by participants included establishing safety; trust and transparency; and empowerment, voice, and choice. Implications include enhancing equity and inclusion for survivors of complex trauma through the implementation of trauma-informed educational practices in open/online postsecondary contexts.

Keywords: adult online learners, postsecondary online learners, complex trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma-informed educational practice

Introduction

Traumatic life experiences are common across the globe. In the United States, about 70% of first-year students have experienced at least one traumatic life event; about 25% have probable posttraumatic stress disorder (Cusack et al., 2019).[1] Notably, in open and online postsecondary environments, the proportion of students with a life history of trauma may be even higher (Davidson, 2017; Giano et al., 2020; Toombs et al., 2022).

Complex trauma is a distinct subset of trauma stemming from extremely threatening or horrific events that extend over time and from which escape is difficult or impossible; examples include torture, slavery, human trafficking, genocide campaigns, and prolonged domestic violence and child abuse (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). The limited research available suggests at least 12% of undergraduate students are survivors of complex trauma (Windle et al., 2018).

The experience of complex trauma profoundly impacts survivors' educational trajectories. Compared to those without a trauma history, survivors have double the risk of completing no educational qualifications (Hardcastle et al., 2018), and a survivor who graduates from high school is 56% less likely to complete an undergraduate degree within six years (Otero, 2021).

This study focused on the experience and needs of complex trauma survivors pursuing postsecondary education online. An extensive literature review did not identify any peer-reviewed research in this area, which is a troubling gap. Listening to and collaborating with survivors is an essential element of trauma-informed practice, which calls on organizations to resist inflicting ongoing harm on survivors (Becker-Blease, 2017; Petrone & Stanton, 2021; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Given the educational impacts of complex trauma and substantial numbers of student survivors, universities should make every effort to avoid "recruiting for failure" (Kelly & Mills, 2007, p. 150), inflicting lifelong financial damage through student loan debt for those who do not complete their programs (Lockwood & Webber, 2023), and causing other forms of harm.

Methodology

Philosophical Assumptions

The transformative research framework provided the primary philosophical underpinning for the study,[2] supported by critical realism, a subjectivist epistemology coupled with a realist ontology (Botha, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The realist ontology was an essential component of the trauma-informed approach within this research; it affirms traumatic reality, disrupting the widespread tendency to discredit and silence survivors and to permit perpetrators to name and define reality (Herman, 1997).

Research Design and Data Collection

This project used an instrumental collective case study design. Participants were recruited via a link in the student portal at a Canadian open/online university. An initial screening survey, the Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire or ACE-IQ (WHO, 2020a)

accompanied by questions to establish interest and eligibility, was completed by 118 respondents. Of these, 89 (75%) met criteria for inclusion.

Three participants were ultimately selected and engaged in the case study (Shoch, 2020). Each chose between an online interview and a detailed questionnaire. Participants were also invited to submit digital artefacts to illuminate their experience as online learners.

Participants

Case study participants were aged 28 to 41. Their scores on the ACE-IQ ranged from 10 to 11 of a possible 13 (WHO, 2020b), more than double the score considered high or indicative of complex trauma (Facer-Irwin et al., 2021; Maunder & Hunter, 2021). Two participants identified as female and one as nonbinary masculine. Two were undergraduates and one was a graduate student.

Data Analysis

Coding of the interview transcript and questionnaire responses took place in stages. I completed pre-coding on printouts before using three manual coding methods in sequence: in vivo, emotion, and values coding (Saldaña, 2016). Analytic memos were written throughout the coding process to support the analysis. Codes were amalgamated and themed before autocoding was completed in NVivo 12 and compared with the manual coding.

Validation

Validation was achieved through triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, and creation of thick, rich descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking involved sending drafts to each participant for review and feedback; participants' feedback was incorporated into subsequent drafts.

Findings

Four themes emerged in response to the main research question: How do adult/postsecondary learners with a history of complex trauma experience online learning, and what are their unique needs in this environment?

Theme 1: Impacts on Learning

Participants identified numerous impacts of complex trauma that affected them as online learners both within their courses and in other interactions with the university such as applying, registering, and accessing financial aid. These impacts included challenges with executive functioning; negative beliefs about the self; difficulties with relationships and affect regulation; re-experiencing traumatic events; and an ongoing heightened perception of threat.

Executive-function-related issues included limited working memory and challenges with planning and organization. For example, one participant stated that "by the time I finish [reading], say, two sentences, I forget the first sentence that I've read." Another stated that she "find[s] it challenging to stay on track," particularly in self-directed online courses.

Participants described negative beliefs about the self, including a stigmatized or shamed identity. One participant said trauma "has had an effect on my self[-]esteem and my belief in my ability to complete school," despite her track record of success. Another stated that "fear of stigma and rejection follows me like a dark cloud wherever I go," resulting in anxiety and panic attacks when interacting with other students online.

Relational difficulties with faculty, staff, and other students were described by all participants, as were challenges with affect regulation. For example, one participant described "ongoing issues attached to the trauma which cause highs and lows mentally. It makes it difficult to focus or causes procrastination." Another discussed "spillover": when she becomes overwhelmed at school, it becomes more difficult for her to manage her personal life and responsibilities (and vice versa).

Re-experiencing past traumatic events and living with ongoing elevated fear were additional complex trauma impacts participants found disruptive for their learning. One participant mentioned auditory and visual flashbacks while engaging in learning, coupled with persistent hypervigilance and fear of violence. Another mentioned being "too afraid" to apply to in-person courses; she chose to study online as a result.

Theme 2: Competent and Capable

Participants expressed and demonstrated their competence and capability as learners navigating impacts of complex trauma.

One participant described herself as "well versed in trauma-informed care." She notices when she becomes triggered and "will go take some time for myself." She demonstrates strong skills in self-advocacy, explaining that "I seem to get a fairly positive response [from university staff] most of the time when I explain that I need help."

Another participant articulated their need to "accommodate mental health challenges and overcome symptoms of trauma in order to engage with content." One strategy they use successfully is to self-soothe by "having my textbook read aloud to me" when they are experiencing flashbacks.

The third participant recognized and worked within her limits, pacing herself carefully as she takes courses "one by one and online." Her competence in managing impacts of her trauma was visible not only in her successful completion of courses, but in her matriculation to university after completing her GED, an achievement attained by a minority of GED recipients (Rossi & Bower, 2018).

Theme 3: Intrinsic Value of Education

All participants emphasized their belief in the intrinsic value of education and their pride in engaging in it. One participant stated that "adult online learning has given me opportunities of intellectual and academic growth I thought was never possible." Their pride as they described their "educational resilience" was palpable. A second said that "the biggest reward [in learning] is just finishing a course for me." A third expressed her pride and determination to succeed in her emphatic statement "I can do this!"

Theme 4: Wanting To Be Seen (and Unseen)

The participants' desire to be seen emerged as a fourth theme. One participant tied this desire to the importance of building trust: "The trust [in the university] could definitely be improved by certain departments being more just receptive to the fact that maybe . . . we have trauma." Another participant shared that "Adult Online Learning [capitals in original] has given me a safe space to share my inspirations, ideas, hopes and fears."

The conflicting desire to be unseen also appeared in the data. Survivors of complex trauma have often learned to be "perfect" or "good" to minimize abuse and as a result may find it difficult and frightening to allow themselves to be seen (Herman, 1997).

Trauma-Informed Educational Practice

Participants were asked to identify which of the established six principles for trauma-informed practice were their top priorities for implementation. One participant identified the principle of trustworthiness and transparency; the second participant identified the principle of empowerment, voice, and choice; and the third selected both the principle of safety and the principle of trustworthiness and transparency, stating that they were so closely intertwined that they could not be separated (SAMHSA, 2014). Recommendations for implementation of these principles included increased options within courses (e.g., choice embedded in assignments); improving the quality and consistency of faculty/tutor communication and support; ensuring faculty and staff respond substantively and in a timely fashion to queries; and examining course materials for inaccurate information, stigma, and bias.

Discussion

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the complex trauma impacts affecting participants as adult online learners broadly align with the diagnostic criteria for complex posttraumatic stress disorder (WHO, 2022). In addition, the findings from the study align with several opinion or advocacy pieces regarding trauma-informed educational practice and trauma survivors as adult/postsecondary learners (e.g., Carello & Butler, 2015; Davidson, 2017; Harper & Neubauer, 2021).

Intriguingly, all participants appeared to frame their understanding of trauma within the dominant biomedical model. This model tends to individualize the problem (and the solution) of trauma and to pathologize survivors, framing the story of trauma as one of individual deficiency rather than systemic harm (Golden, 2020; Petrone & Stanton, 2021).

One of the key means of challenging this dominant model is to use an ecological lens in the discussion of trauma to "illuminate ecologies of privilege, dispossession, and care" (Golden, 2020, p. 76). From the ecological perspective, participants discussed the complexities and challenges of their lives as partners, parents, and individual persons. Many of these challenges are both products and sources of participants' life histories of trauma, including poverty, serious health challenges, parental status, lack of prior formal education, and more.

The president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities recently identified the "need to go beyond providing *access* [emphasis added] to higher ed and ensure that all students are given the support necessary to *complete* [emphasis added] education" (Zalaznick,

2022, para. 6). In a similar vein, Speirs (2020) argued that while equity of access is crucial in higher education, equity of student experience is also essential.

Given the many challenges experienced by complex trauma survivors who learn online, establishing equity of completion and experience is urgently required. Applying an ecological lens to trauma and implementing trauma-informed practices are important targets for change. As Harper and Neubauer (2021) describe, such implementation involves inviting traumatized students to collaborate in defining safety and trust and empowerment. It requires powerful administrators to use their authority to create and promote safety and trust. It requires a fundamental rethinking of power relations in the academy.

Conclusion

Herman (2023) describes the first step towards justice and repair as engaging with survivors to ask what would make things as right as possible for them. She observes that "this sounds like such a reasonable thing to do, but in practice, it is hardly ever done. Listening, therefore, turns out to be a radical act" (p. 4).

This study sought to engage in precisely this radical act. The findings of this small qualitative study support previous calls for implementation of trauma-informed educational practices, particularly in open/online postsecondary environments.

Author Contributions

HS conceptualized the project, collected and analyzed the data, and is the sole author of this paper.

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier

Hilary Schmidt [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3501-5240

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Ethics Statement

This project was reviewed and approved by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (ethics file no. 25118).

Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data for this project are not publicly available. Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the long history of stigmatization and pathologization of trauma survivors in general and complex trauma survivors in particular, participants were promised that no individuals or agencies apart from the original researcher would have access to the raw data. In addition, they were promised they could review drafts and provide feedback on the output of the research prior to publication. This collaboration was essential to a trauma-informed approach and formed elements of the informed consent.

Notes

[1] Comparable research has not been performed to date in Canada, although the proportions are likely similar. For a review of existing statistics, see Johnson and Gianvito (2023).

[2] For complete details, please refer to my thesis (i.e., Schmidt, 2023).

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