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Exploring Retention of Trauma-Exposed Students in Higher Education

An Exploratory Phenomenological Study

by

Alma Jam

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Department of School Psychology and Educational Leadership

Idaho State University

Fall 2020

To the Graduate Faculty:

        The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of ALMA JAM find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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May 20, 2020

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RE: Study Number IRB-FY2020-263 : Exploring Retention of Trauma-Exposed Students in Higher Education An Exploratory Phenomenological Study

Dear Ms. Jam:

Thank you for your responses to a previous review of the study listed above. These responses are eligible for expedited review under OHRP (DHHS) and FDA guidelines. This is to confirm that I have approved your application.

Notify the HSC of any adverse events. Serious, unexpected adverse events must be reported in writing within 10 business days.

You may conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The study is subject to renewal on or before May 20, 2021, unless closed before that date.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. Contact Tom Bailey (208-282-2179; email humsubj@isu.edu) if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Ralph Baergen, PhD, MPH, CIP
Human Subjects Chair

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Exploring Retention of Trauma-Exposed Students in Higher Education

An Exploratory Phenomenological Study

Dissertation Abstract – Idaho State University (2020)

This phenomenological study explored protective factors that students with a history of trauma utilized to persist in postsecondary education. The investigation sheds light on ten participants who were recruited from a 4-year public university located in the western region of the U.S. A preliminary survey was used to help identify study participants who were: 18 years of age or older, were enrolled or planning to enroll in college, had completed three or more years of undergraduate course-work, have completed the online survey in its entirety and indicated qualifying traumatic lifetime events as measured on the Life Experience Checklist (LEC). Each participant had a zoom interview per COVID-19 social distancing protocols. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Moustakas (1994) phenomenological reduction method. Data from the interviews revealed the following central themes: identity, experiencing trauma, navigating academic success, and participant's experiences with posttraumatic growth in their postsecondary journey.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In his 2009 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama pledged an educational initiative through the federal government to ensure that the United States has the world's highest postsecondary attainment rate by 2020 (Obama, 2009). Now, 10 years later, the overall college enrollment rate at four-year institutions increased from 28 to 30% from 2010 to 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). When considering high school graduates, about 1.9 million or 67% of graduates in 2017 enrolled in college by October. The indication of such growth documented by NCES reveals that U.S. students, especially women and those from historically underrepresented and minoritized groups, are increasingly driven to earn a college degree. However, the growing numbers of enrollments only tell one side of the story.

Increasing College Enrollments, Persistence, and Retention

Although access to higher education for American students has improved, student persistence in four-year institutions is far from assured (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). After decades of leading the world in higher education, the plan to ensure that the U.S. has the world's highest postsecondary graduation rate by 2020 continues to be outpaced internationally. This was revealed by the first-ever scientific study that ranked 195 countries and territories for their human capital levels from 1990 to 2016, placing the U.S. at 27th in the world for its investments in education and healthcare (Lim et al., 2018). This study showed a significant rank drop from sixth place in 1990 to 27th place in 2016, particularly in educational attainment. It is pertinent to mention that equity gaps were a significant reason for this result, which revealed that America's white young adults had attainment levels that would rank fourth internationally; however, specific to educational attainment by race in America, black and Latino attainment lagged at 28th and 35th internationally (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016).

For years, the prevailing view of student retention has been shaped by theories that view student retention through the lens of institutional action that seeks to know what institutions can do to retain their students (Allen, 1999). However, retention scholar Vincent Tinto points out that students do not seek to be retained; they seek to persist. According to him, these two perspectives, though necessarily related, are not the same because their interests are different. While the institution's interest is to increase the proportion of their students who graduate from the institution, the student's interest is to complete a degree often without regard to the institution in which it is earned (Tinto, 2017). From the studies reviewed, the meaning of retention is clear. Retention is the continuation of students' education in the subsequent year(s) until completion (Mason & Matas, 2015). However, given the complexity of retention, persistence, and attrition studies in education, scholars may vary in how these terms may be defined. For retention and persistence, this study will utilize definitions as opined by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) 2019 report, which describes retention as the continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall semester of a student's first and second year. Persistence is the continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution, including one different from the initial enrollment institution.

In examining the factors that may impede retention and persistence in postsecondary education, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (2008) national survey of college-qualified students who did not enroll in college listed college costs, availability of aid, and uncertainty about the steps needed to enroll in college as significant deterrents (Hahn & Price, 2008). Brock's (2010) summary of the trends and key issues of persistence also listed preparation for college as another factor and overall, revealed that with the rise of nonselective institutions,

persistence issues are becoming less about the barrier to access, and more so an issue of success once students have enrolled in college.

There have been several studies on student retention and persistence in higher education; however, most have focused on social support, integration (Tinto, 1987, 1988 & 1998), and the characteristics and behavior of students, as illustrated by the "student-centered research tradition" (Smart et al., 2006). Prior reviews have also focused extensively on financial aid (Burke, 2019; Herzog, 2018; Latino et al., 2020; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015; Southwell et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies investigating social support concerning the transition to university have usually taken a psychological perspective to show that social support is vital for successful adjustment to university life (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017; Holmes, 2018; Holt & Fifer, 2018; Pennington et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). Notably, authors who have also investigated aspects of student life outside their course(s) have found that the broader student experience plays a significant role in students' decisions to stay or leave a university (Arria, 2020; Brogden & Gregory, 2019; Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019; Kalmakis, 2020).

While studies have documented the importance of pre-college and external factors that shape student success, few studies focus closely on specific pre-college and external factors such as traumatic experiences. Less attention has been paid to mental health factors that may shape academic persistence and success, and few studies have focused on trauma-based experiences of students and how these events may inform or affect both internal and external day-to-day academic experiences in higher education.

Considering Mental Health and Pre-College Experiences

In his book *Leaving College* (1994), Tinto examined why students departed prematurely from two-year and four-year institutions. He acknowledged that students come to college with

different skills and abilities, varying personal motivation and objectives, and several external commitments that will influence their ability to succeed. However, he argues that what happens to them after they arrive on campus is just as important as what happened to them before (Brock, 2010).

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma results from an event, a series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual that is physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA, 2019). Further understanding of trauma among college students is significant as studies have revealed that about 85% of students reported exposure to a lifetime traumatic event (Read et al., 2011) before entering college. The revelation of this statistic is alarming, and though prior research has pointed to college students as a population unique in developmental life-stage and culture (Arnett, 2000; Sher & Gotham, 1999), it also supports the need to examine psychological phenomena in this population. Past research has already indicated that issues of retention that impede student success may be explained by experiences of traumatic events (Dyregrov, 2004) or chronic exposure to high-stress environments that may lead to or exacerbate psychiatric distress or disorder(s) (Shnurr et al., 2002) before postsecondary enrollment. Therefore, developing an understanding of the protective factors that students with a history of trauma utilize to persist can provide valuable information for researchers who develop intervention programs for college students to retain and persist in higher education. Also, examining such protective factors in depth would fill an essential gap in the literature as previous studies in this area have mainly focused on the adverse effects of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (a mental health problem that may develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-

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threatening event) on college achievement and persistence. Understanding what protective factors influence academic achievement and college persistence among students with a history of trauma can provide valuable information for college administrators, counselors, and educators (Porche et al., 2011).

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to broaden the scope of knowledge on how trauma is understood in higher education by examining how students with a history of trauma experience college and how their college experiences shape their overall perceptions of student success. To do this, I will utilize posttraumatic growth theory (PTG) to guide an exploratory phenomenological study. Given the foundational context of the lived experiences of individuals who have a history of trauma in academia, the following research question and sub-questions guide this study:

1. What are the experiences of students with a history of trauma in reaching and persisting in postsecondary education?

   a. How do students with a history of trauma make meaning of their precollege experiences?

   b. How do they describe the impact(s) of precollege experiences on their college learning?

   c. How do students with a history of trauma define student success?

   d. What resources do students with a history of trauma identify in shaping their success?

   e. What are the lived experiences of posttraumatic growth for students with a history of trauma in postsecondary education?

Definition of Terms

Trauma:

> The unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions in which an individual's ability to integrate an emotional experience is overwhelmed, and the individual experiences (either objectively or subjectively) is a perceived threat to his/her life, bodily integrity, or that of a caregiver or family member (Saakvitne et al., 2000).

Complex Trauma:

> A history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period (months to years) including, but not limited to, child maltreatment, childhood physical or sexual abuse, and or sexual exploitation (Herman, 1997).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:

> PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) is a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019). The DSM-V-TR defines Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as involving three symptom clusters: reexperiencing the event, avoidance behaviors, and hyperarousal. Symptoms related to reexperiencing the event are nightmares and flashbacks (APA, 2000). Those associated with avoidance behaviors are not talking about the event or avoiding triggers and certain related situations. Individuals with hyperarousal may be alert, have trouble sleeping, or have concentration problems (APA, 2013).

Potentially Traumatic Event:

> The DSM-V-TR defines Potentially Traumatic Event (PTE) as a person's subjective response to "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,"

(Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-5],5th ed, APA, 2013, p.

271). A PTE can occur through direct experience, witnessing the event in person,

learning it has occurred to a loved one or repeated exposure to details of the event.

Examples of PTEs include, but are not limited to, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in

childhood, sexual assault, physical assault, being diagnosed with a life-threatening

illness, witnessing violence, or car accidents.

History of Trauma:

The status of an individual who has experienced single or multiple traumatic experiences

during childhood.

Protective Factors:

Protective factors are characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of adverse

outcomes or that reduce a risk factor's impact. Protective factors may be seen as positive

countering events. Some risk and protective factors are fixed: they do not change over

time. Other risk and protective factors are considered variable and can change over time.

Variable risk factors include income level, peer group, adverse childhood experiences

(ACEs), and employment status (SAMHSA. 2019).

Posttraumatic Growth:

The experience of positive change that occurs as a result of crises or trauma. It is

manifested in changes in self-perception, changes in interpersonal relationships, and a

changed philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction to the Literature

This chapter aims to provide a thorough review of the literature that informs the basis of this study. I will present the literature relevant to this phenomenological study concerning postsecondary students' lived experiences with a history of trauma related to their identity, their understanding of student success, and educational experience during their postsecondary years. In doing so, I will first provide pertinent literature regarding the understanding of trauma, how it has been studied over time, and how it is understood today. Next, I will provide an overview of the impediments and barriers childhood exposure to trauma may cause to learning and how this may affect postsecondary students' experience and the educational achievement gap. This chapter's final sections will address post-traumatic growth theory as a theoretical underpinning for this study and a rationale for selecting a phenomenological research approach and relevant supporting literature.

Part I: What is Trauma?

Trauma is generally defined by stress events that present extraordinary challenges to an individual's coping and adaptation (SAMHSA, 2019). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (DM-V; APA, 2013) definition of traumatic stressors includes "experiencing, witnessing, or confronting events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" (p. 467). The individual experiences (subjectively) a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity and may feel emotionally, cognitively, and physically overwhelmed (Luoni, 2018). The event's circumstances commonly include abuse of power, betrayal of trust, entrapment, helplessness, pain, confusion, or loss and may create psychological trauma leaving that person fearing death, annihilation, mutilation, or psychosis.

Such events can include life-threatening accidents or illness, sexual and physical assault, robbery, and being kidnapped (Boyraz et al., 2013). Other examples of trauma include natural disasters, war, organized violence, terrorism (Brunello et al. 2001; Kessler, 2000;), domestic violence, including aggressive and threatening peer victimization, severe neglect, traumatic injury, and traumatic loss of a loved one (Sachser et al., 2017). This definition of trauma is broad and intentionally does not allow one to determine whether a particular event is traumatic than another. That is up to each survivor. In other words, trauma is defined by the experience of the survivor (Boals, 2018). However, this definition provides a guideline for our understanding of a survivor's experience of his/her life (Giller, 2009).

The term Potentially Traumatic Events (PTEs) was introduced to describe events that could potentially cause trauma such as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (APA, 2013) and significantly contribute to risk for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and other stress-related psychiatric disorders (Breslau et al., 1998). In the U.S., 61% of men and 51% of women report exposure to at least one-lifetime PTE event (SAMHSA, 2019). In institutions of higher education, the prevalence of trauma-exposure among college students increases with approximately 50 to 85% of college students who reported being exposed to at least one trauma before entering college (Anders et al., 2014; Boyraz et al., 2015).

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Generally described as child maltreatment and household dysfunction, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) include physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and growing up with a mentally ill or substance-abusing member of the household, witnessing domestic violence, experiencing parental divorce/separation, and having an incarcerated family member. Exposure

to ACEs has long-term health implications (CDCP, 2009). The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study (Felitti et al., 1998) was a major medical research project that posed the question of whether and how childhood experiences affect adult health decades later (Weiss & Wagner, 1998). ACE (like PTEs) are potentially traumatic events that can have adverse, lasting effects on health and wellbeing (Felitti et al., 1998). The ACE Study described the relationship of health risk behavior and disease in adulthood to the breadth of exposure to childhood emotional, physical, or sexual abuse and household dysfunction during childhood. These experiences range from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse to parental divorce or the incarceration of a parent or guardian. To identify these experiences, the ACE Study designed a self-report questionnaire containing 10 questions written to elicit dichotomous yes/no responses to capture the respondent's exposure, before age 18. Exposure to ACEs on the questionnaire included child maltreatment, domestic violence, parental separation/divorce, having a member of the household who was mentally ill, abused substances, or incarceration. The authors suggest that dichotomous variables can be used to classify these scores: 0 (the referent for the other scores), 1, 2, 3, and 4 or more ACEs. For example, the initial sample size (n = 1,142) of young adults from the Chicago Longitudinal Study prevalence rates of ACE scores were shown to be: 20.5% with 0, 31.6% with 1, 20.8% with 2, 18.8% with 3 or 4 ACEs and 8.3% with 5 or more ACEs. Larger ACE scores were found to be predictive of negative outcomes with an increased likelihood of developing panic reactions, depressed affect, anxiety, and stress, thus at greater odds of experiencing negative mental health outcomes. As a result, authors in the study indicated that ACE scores of 4 or more out of 10 should be noted as a cut-off point for denoting poorer outcome probability (Mello, 2016). The ACEs questionnaire appears to have similar results to other studies of

childhood adversities, and its brief questionnaire, which requires limited interpretation of questions (Jacobs et al., 2012), has proven to be a useful tool in research.

Though ACEs occur regularly with children age 0 to 18 years across all races, economic classes, and geographic regions with a much higher prevalence for those living in poverty (AAP, 2014), the findings suggested that ACEs are major risk factors for the leading causes of illness, disability and death as well as poor quality of life in the U.S. (Anda et al. 2006; Felitti et al., 1998; Goldberg, 2016). Such exposure also increases the chance of social risk factors, mental health issues, substance abuse, intimate partner violence, and adult adoption of risky adult behaviors. However, it should be noted that none of these studies accounted for the potential impacts of positive protective factors against mental health concerns.

Along with the original ACE Study (1998), there are known predictive factors included in the list of adverse experiences. These can be single, acute events, or sustained over time. Examples include the death of a parent and the detrimental effect of community violence and poverty (AAP, 2014). Because exposure to potentially traumatic events has a lasting effect on individuals, medical researchers, sociologists, and healthcare professionals increasingly recognize trauma as a significant factor in a wide range of health, behavioral health, and social problems (Felitti et al., 1998). Trauma resulting from prolonged or repeated exposure to violent events can be the most severe (NCTSN, 2003). However, theoretical models of traumatic stress syndromes and the literature on PTSD have established that individuals react to trauma in their own way, depending on the nature of and circumstances surrounding their traumatic experiences (Bonnano, 2004; Wilson & Drozdek, 2004; Wilson et al., 2001).

Part II. The Effects of Trauma on Academic Success

Previous studies have considered a range of factors like financial aid, academic and social involvement that affect retention and college completion. However, few studies have examined the link between mental health and academic success in college, even though three-quarters of lifetime mental disorders have the first onset by the typical college-age range of 18 to 24 years (Kessler et al., 2005). As such, traditionally aged college students are at an increased risk for exposure to PTEs (Anders et al., 2012, 2014; Edwards et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding this connection could be valuable due to how college settings can reach young people.

Research in the last 20 years has shown the impact of childhood trauma on human development, social development, and learning (Lieberman & Knorr, 2007; Michaels, 2012). Childhood trauma may lead to substantial impact on typical brain development, learning, and may cause social/emotional implications (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005; Fritz, 2017; Goldson, 2002; Siegfried et al., 2004). Many students (regardless of age or academic standing) are exposed to a wide variety of traumatic experiences that have long-lasting effects as they begin their postsecondary education (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014). By the time students arrive college, as many as 85% of them may report exposure to a lifetime traumatic event or multiple traumatic events (Read et al., 2011). Smyth et al. (2008) found that more than half of all college students have experienced a "significant stressful or adverse life experience" (p. 4). Their study was supported by Read et al. (2011), which found that out of 3,014 of incoming college students, 66% of them reported lifetime exposure to at least one *Criterion A* trauma (e.g., direct exposure or witnessing the trauma, learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to trauma or indirect exposure to aversive details of the trauma) listed in the DM-V. Also, 45% of them reported multiple Criterion A events, and approximately 9% of the overall sample (13.3% of the trauma-exposed

sample) met the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis (Boyraz et al., 2013). This study indicated that several college students enter college with a history of multiple traumatic events and possibly a PTSD diagnosis (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Duncan, 2000; Galatzer-Levy et al., 2012; Green et al., 2000; Read et al., 2011). These exposures increase PTSD symptomatology (Read et al., 2011), college adjustment difficulties (Banyard & Cantor, 2004), and difficulties in academic achievement and college persistence (Anders et al., 2012; Banyard & Cantor, 2004). Also, students who enter college with greater trauma exposure have decreased academic and personal emotional adjustment (Porche et al., 2011). Sharkin (2006) identified the following signs of distress that might affect their academic success as changes in behavior (e.g., academic performance, social interactions, and class participation): falling asleep in class, requesting special consideration, not completing assignments, and frequently needing clarification from the instructor (Jolley, 2017). Such exposure to PTEs places students at an increased risk for difficulties in college (Anders et al., 2012; Banyard & Cantor, 2004), making them more susceptible to dropping out (Duncan, 2000), experiencing depression (Turner & Butler, 2003), and attempting or completing suicide (Bridgeland et al., 2001).

Additionally, as many as 50% of new college students may experience a traumatic event during their freshman year (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2012). Fisher et al. (2000) found that students are also at higher risk of being retraumatized during their college experience. For example, according to Fisher et al. (2003) and Fisher and Cullen (2000) studies, data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) indicates that between 1995 and 2013, the age group that consistently experienced the highest rates of rape or sexual assault were females 18 to 24 years of age, which was higher than females in any other age bracket (Fisher et al., 2003; Fisher & Cullen, 2000).

To date, only a few studies have focused on examining the relationship between PTSD, college persistence, and academic success (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Bachrach & Read, 2012; Boyraz et al., 2013; Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019; Duncan, 2000). Duncan (2000) found that PTSD symptoms in the first year predicted college enrollment in the senior year by revealing that those with greater PTSD symptomatology were less likely to enroll in their senior year. Also, being exposed to multiple traumas in childhood (i.e., more than one form of childhood maltreatment) was associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out of college (Duncan, 2000). When it comes to attrition studies, trauma exposure and PTSD have been found to play a role in whether students remain enrolled in college. Prior traumatic experiences result in adverse effects of attrition and support Alexander and colleagues' (2001) argument that dropping out of school is not an event, but rather a process that begins as early as first grade, influenced by socio-demographics, family stress (e.g., frequent moves, divorce), and parental and personal resources. Throughout the process leading to attrition, many behavioral factors, such as tardiness, skipping class, fighting (Suh & Suh, 2007), and delinquency (Newcomb et al., 2002) have been shown to predict school dropout when controlling for academic and demographic correlates (Porche et al., 2011). The effects of trauma exposure and PTSD have also been linked to other adverse outcomes among college students, such as alcohol and drug use (Bachrach & Read, 2012; Newcomb et al., 2002; Read et al., 2012;). It may also lead to mental health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, or PTSD) and the adoption of risky behaviors (SAMHSA, 2019). Previous research has also indicated that the experience of traumatic events and PTSD is closely related to students' academic and emotional adjustment to college (Arata, et al., 2005; Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Elliott et al., 2009). Notably, interpersonal forms of PTEs (i.e., physical assault, robbery, sexual assault) are consistently rated as more severe by individuals than non-interpersonal forms

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of PTEs (i.e., car accidents, death of a loved one) and, thus, are more predictive of adjustment difficulties (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Boyraz et al., 2015; Read et al., 2012). Also, Frazier et al.'s (2009) study showed that 21% of college students who have been exposed to trauma reported a new traumatic event while in college (Frazier et al., 2009). Lastly, certain demographic variables, including gender, ethnocultural identity, and socioeconomic status (SES), may be predictive of the type and accumulation of PTEs (Banyard & Cantor, 2004). These findings highlight the negative consequences of trauma exposure and PTSD among college students and emphasize further research in this area.

Socioeconomic Status

College education has become an increasingly important tool for upward mobility. It is associated with substantially higher earnings (Brezis & Hellier, 2018; Marginson, 2016) and better health outcomes (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006). Educational research has consistently found that socioeconomic status (SES) has a significant impact on student academic achievement (Sirin, 2005) as they face additional barriers to academic achievement (Goodman et al., 2012). Across the U.S., states spend an average of 900 dollars less per student each year in school districts with the most impoverished students versus districts with the fewest poor students (Education Trust, 2005). At the secondary level, an average of 24% of teachers lack either a major or minor in their subject area. In high poverty schools, this number increases to 34%, putting low-income students at greater risk for underachievement due to low teacher quality (Jerald, 2002). As such, Goodman et al. (2012) found that academic achievement scores were significantly lower for students from lower SES and indicated that low-SES students were more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability or behavior disorder. Finally, this study's results indicate that the rate of traumatic stress is significantly higher among lower SES students,

suggesting that low-SES students experience trauma at a higher rate or have fewer resources with which to improve the effects of trauma (Goodman et al., 2012). For these students, the results of academic underachievement reach beyond the educational setting, often leading to deviant behaviors, fewer opportunities in life, and difficulty earning a living wage (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Orfield et al., 2004).

Community Cultural Wealth

The Bioecological Model of Mass Trauma (BMMT) was proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a model of human development demonstrating how an individual is significantly affected by interactions among several mesosystems (connections between systems). These nested systems form the social context that determines the impact of life events on an individual and his or her response to events. The integrative model starts with the biophysical underpinnings of the trauma response and is consistent with the current interpersonal neurobiology concept. In this interdisciplinary approach, human experience's biological, psychological, and social aspects are woven into a coherent whole whereby each is understood separately and connected (Hoffman & Kruczek, 2011). Interpersonal neurobiology serves as the fundamental underpinning of all human experiences, including trauma (Siegel, 2010). Disasters and community-based catastrophes are merely one type of life event that can be understood using an ecological model such as BMMT. Most days, some aspects of these events affect individuals and communities directly or indirectly, creating a persistent stress environment. A common theme woven through these traumatic events is that traditional resources of the individual, family, and community are either lost or severely compromised. Stressors created by exposure to one mass trauma event (e.g., fear, loss of employment, fewer community resources) may have a "ripple" effect and affect subsequent resources available to manage future exposure to mass

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traumatic events. Alternatively, one type of event (e.g., terrorism) might lead directly or indirectly to another mass trauma event such as war.

Yosso (2005) developed the concept of community cultural wealth (CCW) to challenge and extend Bourdieu's use of cultural and social capital—capitals most attributed to white middle-class families. She defines CCW as "the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 1). Yosso stresses that marginalized and vulnerable students, families, and communities have multiple forms of capital that have been used and shared for survival and mobility. They include "aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. These forms of capital draw on the pieces of knowledge students, primarily students of color, bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom" (p. 1). Among these forms of capital is navigational capital, which Yosso (2005) refers to as the "skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (p. 80). She highlighted the context of this maneuvering as happening through institutions that were not meant to include people of color with the support systems to help them reintegrate and adjust to college life. Despite this, students from such backgrounds and identities accessed navigational capital from cultural wealth learned in the spaces they had experienced.

Exploring Positive Outcomes of Trauma Among College Students

Although more than half of college students report exposure to PTEs, only 6 to 12% of undergraduate students report symptoms of PTSD (Anders et al., 2012; Read et al., 2009). While still a significant sample of college students, these numbers suggest that many students adjust well despite PTE exposure (Jolley, 2017). Meta-analyses of the negative effects of traumas such as child maltreatment have generally found smaller effect sizes for college student samples (e.g.,

Jumper, 1995), leading some researchers to discuss whether college students are a more resilient sample of trauma survivors (Banyard, & Cantor, 2004). In a qualitative study of older returning college students, LeBlanc, Brabant, and Forsyth (1996) discussed how college might be part of survivors' healing. Some term this concept of positive adaptation in the face of stress or trauma as resilience (Masten, 2001). Individuals who are deemed resilient often possess and utilize a combination of protective factors to mitigate the effects of PTEs (Banyard & Cantor, 2004). Such factors may include cognitive capacity, healthy attachment relationships (especially with parents and caregivers), the motivation and ability to learn and engage with the environment, the ability to regulate emotions and behavior, and supportive environmental systems, including education, cultural beliefs, and faith-based communities (AAP, 2014; Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Grasso et al., 2012; Jolley, 2017; Pascarella, 1996; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1987). Studies like LeBlanc et al.'s (1996) pique the interest of research in determining if individuals who attend college are more prone to having higher resilience rates, particularly if they have experienced adversity in life (Mello, 2016). However, other work shows that for some students, this transition to college may be complicated by trauma exposure (e.g., Duncan, 2000; Lauterbach, 1999; Zamostny et al., 1993), and indeed show that childhood traumas such as abuse, have been linked to an increased likelihood of dropping out of college, depression, and suicide (Bridgeland, et al., 2001; Duncan, 2000; Mazzeo & Espelage, 2002; Turner & Butler, 2003;).

Part III: Conceptual Framework

Posttraumatic growth theory (PTG) was chosen as the conceptual framework to guide this study. In this section, I will utilize this conceptual framework to explain the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform this study (Miles &

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Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2011). In a broader sense, it serves as a model to understand the 'how,' 'what,' and 'why' of this study and helps inform the design by assessing and refining the goals, developing realistic and relevant research questions, selecting appropriate methods, and identifying potential validity threats to the framework.

Posttraumatic Growth Theory

A growing body of literature suggests the existence of perceived positive outcomes in the aftermath of a traumatic event (Lindstrom et al., 2013; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Linley et al., 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). These positive changes have been characterized through several concepts in the literature such as finding benefits (Affleck & Tennen, 1996), stress-related growth (Park et al., 1996), thriving (O'Leary et al., 1998), positive psychological changes (Yalom & Lieberman, 1991), or adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Grounded in Positive Psychology—the science of positive aspects of human life, such as happiness, wellbeing and flourishing (Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014)—posttraumatic growth (PTG) is the most used construct to describe the positive changes experienced as a result of the psychological and cognitive efforts made in order to deal with challenging circumstances (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001, 2006). It is a strengths-based concept coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) that centers on the idea that growth can occur due to trauma and ultimately can have a significantly positive impact on an individual's life. This phenomenon's premise was captured by the positive psychological changes they had witnessed as clinical psychologists among their patients who were coming to terms with highly stressful and challenging life events. To this end, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) viewed PTG as both a process and an outcome. They identified three overarching categories of potential benefits due to trauma: changes in self-perception, changes in interpersonal relationships, and a changed philosophy of life.

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Critiques of Posttraumatic Growth Theory

Though the proposed models of PTG by Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) and Schaefer & Moos (1992) have been of great value in trauma research, critics of PTG claim that the phenomenon itself is still not well understood and cannot yet be described in a theoretically satisfying manner or measured with reliability and validity (Zoellner, & Maercker, 2006). Recent meta-analytic reviews have also highlighted glaring inconsistencies in the empirical findings relating to PTG and adjustment as an outcome or a coping strategy. They argue that when PTG is treated as a coping strategy, empirical evidence may support one of two possibilities: either PTG is adaptive, indicating that it is a resource and protective factor, or it is maladaptive, suggesting that it is a risk factor (e.g., Zoellner & Maercker, 2006; Helgeson et al., 2006). Furthermore, most of the available research on PTG is based on retrospective self-reports obtained using cross-sectional designs. Because of this, it is unclear whether self-reported PTG reflects actual life changes or simply retrospective reattribution for the pain experienced during the recovery process (i.e., "I am better now, so I must have grown") (Bonnano, 2005, p. 267).

Several researchers have also found that self-reported change attributed to stressful events often involves derogation of past selves rather than actual life changes, suggesting that PTG may reflect self-protective and self-enhancing processes (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2001). Indeed, one of the few studies that assessed the validity of perceived stress-related growth using multiple methodologies found that endorsement of growth on specific subscales of the PTG was unrelated to actual changes reported in corresponding areas of life (Steger, 2006).

Other critiques propose that while PTG theory might be valuable for individuals seeking to reframe how they understand past trauma, it may also run the risk of perpetuating narratives

that people need to experience trauma to grow or be successful and thereby perpetuating false "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" narratives about adversity and success. From a psychological standpoint, Hobfoll et al. (2007) argues that PTG may be a genuine "marker of positive adaptation" but only "when accompanied by actions, not solely cognitive maneuvers" (p. 359). This shift in focus provides a significant change from the continuous evaluation of cognitive processing and "working through" stressful events that have dominated trauma literature (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). However, a significant limitation in Hobfoll and colleagues' (2007) approach is that they fail to consider the possibility that there are many people who do not need to "reconstitute their relations to others" (p. 349) or experience action-focused growth following trauma, but instead continue to be able to fulfill personal and interpersonal demands even in the face of considerable adversity. Furthermore, critics claim that PTG does not show any strong associations with well-researched concepts in psychology and is not reliably linked to adjustment measures, therefore suggesting more research on PTG, mainly in longitudinal and possibly process-oriented research (Zoellner, & Maercker, 2006).

Nevertheless, PTG is valued for its contributions to trauma research and significant in application to clinical practice. It is also an intriguing construct because it suggests potentially new angles from which to examine psychological trauma. Considering PTG as a different potential outcome of coping with trauma broadens clinical knowledge by adding a new perspective, not a new treatment, into psychotherapy. It is also appealing because it conveys hope amidst adversity and seems to provide a way to integrate the complex study of trauma in psychology and the social sciences toward more positive aspects of human nature in the possibility that adverse events and protective factors experienced together have the potential to foster resilience.

Connecting Posttraumatic Growth Theory to College Student Development and Success

Previous studies have considered PTG from adversity in a wide range of similar samples of people exposed to a specific type of adversity, such as cancer survivors, transport accidents, and military combat (Barakat et al., 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004). As a result, the understanding PTG or "growth from adversity" has been confined to narrow samples of survivors and excludes the potential range of intentional and non-intentional adversity that people may experience in their lifetime (Brooks et al., 2016). One sample where a range of adversarial events could be considered is university students. This enables exploring both intentional and non-intentional adversity types and may reflect a proportion of the trauma populations who exhibits growth after PTEs that buffers against pathology such as PTSD (Bensimon, 2012).

Application in the Present Study

As suggested by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), the framework of PTG is significant in studies that explore the understanding of the conditions under which growth may occur and offers insight into the design and implementation of therapeutic interventions. As mentioned, its framework was developed under the witnesses of individuals' transformation in the face of extreme circumstances. In an opportunity to explore students' growth despite adversity, PTG can serve as a guide to inform and understand the critical approaches to consider, to understand better, and serve students with a history of trauma in postsecondary education. Also, notable, the awareness of trauma and its wide-reaching impacts are becoming more recognized in education. Therefore, it remains evident through PTG and other growth theories that students who have experienced trauma can persist, and those who do, thrive as models of resilience and success. Filling such gaps of research may help provide a better understanding of what colleges can do to

create the conditions that foster student retention and persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999), especially for students with a history of trauma.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to this exploratory phenomenological study. Specifically, I provided definitions of trauma, how trauma has been studied over time, and how it is understood today. Next, this chapter included literature on trauma and its relation to academic success in identifying potential barriers to education that contribute to students' educational achievement gap with a history of trauma. A review of PTG, its critiques, and rational to guide this study was provided to relate the theoretical basis of why students with a history of trauma could experience growth due to trauma.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study employed constructivist approaches to phenomenology to examine students' experiences with a history of trauma in reaching and persisting in postsecondary education. I conducted personal interviews with 10 students who reported having a history of trauma to provide information that will be valuable for improving the effectiveness of student success through institutional and community support strategies. In this chapter, I will restate the research questions before providing an overview of the methods, including the theoretical approach, sampling procedures, data collection, and analytical plans.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study is intended to examine students lived educational experiences with a reported history of trauma who are currently enrolled or have completed postsecondary education. By directly capturing their voices, I provided a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to educational attainment and the potential posttraumatic growth that occurred throughout their experience. In doing so, I was guided by the following overarching research question and proceeding sub-questions:

1. What are the experiences of students with a history of trauma in reaching and persisting in postsecondary education?

   a. How do students with a history of trauma make meaning of their pre-college experiences?

   b. How do they describe the impact(s) of pre-college experiences on their college learning?

   c. How do students with a history of trauma define student success?

   d. What resources do students with a history of trauma identify in shaping their success?

e. What are the lived experiences of posttraumatic growth for students with a history of

trauma in postsecondary education?

Phenomenological Approach

In this study, I utilized phenomenology, a qualitative research method used to describe

the meaning or significance of an individual's lived experiences within the world (Neubauer et

al., 2019). Phenomenology is a research tradition rooted in the 20th century philosophical

traditions and stresses that only those who experienced phenomena can communicate them to the

outside world (Todres & Holloway, 2004). More specifically, I utilized Heidegger's (1962)

phenomenological approach, known as Hermeneutics. Heidegger's approach to phenomenology

is consistent with more extensive constructivist views of knowledge production. Constructivism

refers to how reality is constructed through a person's active lived experience (Foerster, 1984;

Jonassen, 1991; Von Glasersfeld, 1988; Watzlawick, 1984). In a research context, the inquiry is

seen as a collaborative process between researchers and participants (McNamee, 2012).

In practice, Heidegger's Hermeneutic approach differs from earlier forms of

phenomenology in that researchers do not apply bracketing. Bracketing is defined as the

suspension of the researcher's preconceptions, beliefs, or prejudices not to influence the

interpretation of the respondents' experience (Parahoo, 2006). Unlike earlier phenomenologists,

Heidegger challenged the idea of bracketing by suggesting that the researcher is as much a part

of the research as the participant and that their ability to interpret the data was reliant on previous

knowledge (Heidegger, 1962). He argued that there is no such thing as interpretive research free

of the researcher's judgment or influence because our awareness is intrinsic to phenomenological

research (Johnson, 2000; Reiners, 2012).

Applying Posttraumatic Growth Theory

As described in Chapter 2, posttraumatic growth also guided the methodological approach of this study. Specifically, this study utilized phenomenological methods to examine posttraumatic growth—the idea that life difficulties can lead to growth in humans—to understand how students with a history of trauma define student success and experience postsecondary education. Consistent with a constructionist worldview and Hermeneutic phenomenology, the concept of posttraumatic growth assumes that the world is constructed based on the meaning one creates through engaging in the world around them (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Crotty, 1998). This study focuses on students with a history of trauma to reflect on their previous environment(s) and relay their own experiences through the research process. Also, I sought to understand if students experience environments that promote or hinder perceived posttraumatic growth in college and represent through their voices how they interpreted student success, the educational environment, and interactions with the campus community.

Overview of Data Collection Procedures

This phenomenological study utilized interview data obtained from a purposeful sample of 10 students who reported having a history of trauma at a mid-sized four-year public research university. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). A common approach within education research, this technique is often used when the characteristics of a specific group of individuals match the attributes of the phenomenon being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). I implemented homogeneity as the purposeful sampling strategy to select homogeneous cases to reduce variation, simplify the analysis, and

facilitate individual interviewing (Palinkas et al. 2015). Purposeful sampling involves identifying

and selecting individuals that are (1) knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of

interest, (2) available and willing to participate, and (3) can communicate experiences and

opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011;

Spradley, 2016). In my study, a preliminary survey was administered to identify eligible

participants who have experienced the phenomenon of interest, relying on existing measures of

trauma exposure discussed below.

Preliminary Survey

The preliminary survey was used to help identify study participants. Following

Institutional Review Board approval, I recruited participants through organizations and programs

that work directly with students who may have a history of trauma and may already be accessing

services (e.g., campus counseling centers, veteran student services, health centers, etc.). Flyers

(Appendix E) contained a short description of the study, participant criteria list, contact

information, and a link URL and or QR Code to scan inviting interested participants to

participate in the preliminary online survey created through Qualtrics (a web-based software

survey platform). The selection criteria for this study included participants who are: 18 years of

age or older, are enrolled or planning to enroll in college, have completed three or more years of

undergraduate course-work, have completed the online survey in its entirety and indicated

qualifying traumatic lifetime events as measured on the Life Experience Checklist (LEC). Before

disseminating the preliminary survey, I tested it to ensure adequacy and ordering of the

questions, comprehensiveness of the content, clarity of instructions, the feasibility of the

technology (e.g., inclusive accessibility), and data compatibility/transfer issues (Regmi et al.,

2016).

Regarding consent, I ensured that all information regarding the study, participants' rights, and the researcher's contact details were provided on the questionnaire's first page (see Appendix A: Part I). This section also screened for age to ensure that only participants who are 18± years could proceed. The first part of the survey consisted of the LEC (Appendix A: Part II), a 17-item self-report measure designed to screen for potentially traumatic events in a respondent's lifetime (Blake et al., 1995). It assessed exposure to 16 events known to potentially result in PTSD or distress and included one item assessing any other extraordinarily stressful event(s) (Weathers et al., 2013). The questionnaire also concluded with a brief demographic survey (Appendix A: Part III), capturing age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, income, pre-college environment, student classification, and college classification. All participants who completed the preliminary survey were also provided with an electronic list of resources (see Appendix D).

Life Events Checklist

Created by the Veteran Affairs (VA) National Center of PTSD, the Life Events Checklist (LEC) is a brief, 17-item, self-report measure designed to screen for potentially traumatic events in a respondent's lifetime (Price & Stevens, 2009). It assesses exposure to 16 event categories with known potential to result in significant distress and PTSD and includes an additional item addressing any other extraordinarily stressful events not captured by the 16 categories. For each item, the respondent checks whether the event:

1. Happened to them personally

2. They witnessed the event

3. They learned about the event

4. They are not sure if the item applies to them

5. The item does not apply to them (Weathers et al., 2013).

According to the VA National Center for PTSD, the LEC has demonstrated good psychometric properties as a stand-alone assessment of traumatic exposure, particularly when evaluating the consistency of events that happened to a respondent. The LEC has also demonstrated convergent validity with measures assessing varying levels of exposure to potentially traumatic events and psychopathology known to relate to traumatic exposure (Gray et al., 2004). Three formats of the LEC are available. They include the standard self-report used to establish if an event occurred, the extended self-report used to establish the worst event if more than one event occurred, and the interview version, used to establish if *Criterion A* is met. The LEC is often used in combination with other measures (e.g., CAPS-5, PCL-5) to establish exposure to a PTSD *Criterion A* traumatic event (Gray et al., 2004). For this study's purposes, the standard self-report LEC was used in the preliminary survey to screen for respondents who reported at least one potentially traumatic event in their lifetime. Respondents who meet this criterion were to be selected and invited to participate in the interview.

Sample Size

A novel virus called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-19) was identified in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, resulting in a pandemic (WHO, 2020). By January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and a pandemic in March 2020. Due to the need for physical distancing and isolation, universities physically closed and moved online. Many research activities, such as participant recruitment, study visits, and outcomes assessments, were halted in addition to the closures and cancellations. Considering the sudden and rapid societal change in response to the pandemic, this study's recruiting efforts were greatly affected. Before these changes, I intended to implement physical and virtual recruitment efforts to obtain at least 16 participants from

various locations and organizations on campus and the community. Some of these recruitment efforts included table booths, class/club presentations, poster/flyer displays, etc. Due to the pandemic's sudden social restrictions, considerable adjustments had to be made to the study's recruitment procedures and data collection methods. Despite all the changes, I successfully pre-screened over 30 candidates who were solely recruited online via social media and or email outreach. From this pool of candidates, 17 of them qualified and were invited to participate in the study. This outreach resulted in a final sample of 10 participants who accepted the invitation and provided consent to participate.

Also, and noteworthy to mention, samples in qualitative research tend to be small to support the depth of case-oriented analysis fundamental to the model of inquiry (Sandelowski, 1996). Since the researcher's intent is not to generalize from the sample to a population, but rather to explain, describe, and interpret the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013), sample sizes are typically large enough to obtain enough data to sufficiently describe the phenomenon of interest and small enough to address the research questions with a primary goal of attaining saturation. Saturation occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives or information. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend the concept of saturation for achieving an appropriate sample size in qualitative studies. However, in regards to sampling, scholars have addressed sample size directly in qualitative research. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (2013) suggested collecting extensive details about a few sites or individuals. He recommends three to 10 cases, with observed sample sizes from one to 325 while Morse (1994) suggests at least six. Though these recommendations can help a researcher estimate how many participants they will need, determining sample size involves "judgment and experience in

evaluating the quality of the information against uses to which it will be put" (Sandelowski, 1995 p.183). Nevertheless, sample size is contingent on many considerations (Guetterman, 2015).

Interview Data Collection

The general purpose of a phenomenological interview is to understand shared meanings by drawing from the respondent's lived experience. Therefore, phenomenological interviews are not "conducted," but instead, they are "participated in" by both the interviewer and the respondent(s) (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). Participants in this study include 10 students who reported having a history of trauma. While participants were selected purposefully to minimize variation, some factors differentiated individual participants based on the types of adversity they encountered and how they uniquely informed their college experience. Individual interviews allowed me to have an in-depth understanding of each participant and were also beneficial in that they provided space and opportunity for participants to discuss their experiences in a private and confidential setting. It also provided the opportunity to observe body language, attitudes, and behavior that richly informed the data.

Because the identification of participants with a history of trauma required special attention to protecting participants' privacy, I investigated appropriate procedures from my committee and obtained the necessary approval granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. This study selected 10 participants who were 18 years of age or older, were enrolled or planning to enroll in college, had completed three or more years of undergraduate course-work, had completed the online survey in its entirety, and indicated qualifying traumatic lifetime events as measured on the LEC. Participants selected for interviews in this study were sent a consent form ahead of time for review (Appendix B: Part I). If interested in participating, they were given the option to schedule an interview session via Calendly (an online scheduling

application). Each interview took approximately 45 to 60 minutes via Zoom. The email also

included a password protected link to complete the ACE questionnaire (Appendix B: Part II).

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Questionnaire

The ACE questionnaire developed by Felitti et al. in the 1998 ACE Study is used to

assess childhood adversities' prevalence rates. This 10-item self-report measure was designed to

identify childhood experiences of abuse and neglect and how participants experienced trauma

before college. Regarding physical and mental health, the questionnaire also identifies significant

risk factors that may lead to health and social issues. An example of an ACE question is "Did a

parent or other adult in the household often…Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or

humiliate you? Or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt? Yes/No."

Each affirmative answer is assigned one point. In the questionnaire's conclusion, the points are

totaled for a score out of 10, known as the ACE score (Murphy et al., 2014). According to Felitti

et al. (1998), the ACE questionnaire highlights how childhood experiences influence the possible

development of mental health issues in adulthood. Also, and noteworthy to mention,

identification of adverse events as indicated in the ACE measure may or may not have resulted in

PTSD since the ACE questionnaire only captures responses as "yes/no" rather than "how much"

or "how severe." Once participants were identified through the preliminary survey, the ACE

questionnaire (Appendix B: Part II) was sent to them. Responses from the ACE questionnaire

were anonymous, meaning that the researcher could not trace the data to an individual

participant. Perfect anonymity arguably comes when the following aspects of identity are

masked: legal name, location, pseudonyms linked to name or location, contact information,

appearance and behavior patterns, or social categorization. In this way, participants may feel

more comfortable completing the questionnaire. Also, and noteworthy to mention, taking the

questionnaire was intended to prime participants to think about their ACE-related experiences before the interview. It was utilized to: (1) help participants determine their understanding of and willingness to reflect on ACEs during the interview and (2) reflect on the list of factors or resources that may have helped them develop PTG in order to persist in college despite their history of trauma.

For this study's purposes, data collected from the ACE questionnaire also served to capture broad adversity and identify the overall stressors of the participants' environments. It also served to inform a better understanding of mental health concerns students with a history of trauma experienced based on the type of adversity they experienced. Understanding the connection between adverse childhood experiences, social issues, and adult mental and physical health in this study also helped to inform policy suggestions in the discussion section that may support awareness, healing, and recovery in higher education.

Pilot of Instrument

Merriam (2009) stressed that it is crucial to pilot your instrument and interview questions to gain feedback on the flow, clarity, and understanding of participants' questions. Piloting can test the feasibility for the proposed study, acceptability of an interview or observation protocols to enhance the credibility of a phenomenological study (Holloway, 1997; Lancaster et al., 2016). Kim (2011) posited pilot studies are of particular importance in phenomenological research to account for issues and barriers related to recruiting participants, engaging the use of oneself as a researcher to address epoche (suspension of judgment) before the study, and the opportunity to modify the interview questions. For these reasons, I piloted the interview protocol to refine the instrument if necessary, before this study. To do this, I recruited two participants and used the same recruitment strategies as outlined in the data collection section and appendices. I asked the

participants what it was like to answer the questions and if they felt as if any of the questions

should be changed or altered in the interview protocol or if any of the questions I asked them

should be changed. After the pilot interviews, I utilized journaling to reflect on the interview

experience and addressed any relevant study details. I also reviewed the recordings and

transcripts of the interviews to assess any changes that needed to be made to the interview

protocol to address the research questions in this study.

Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview protocol is shown below in Appendix C. Generally,

interview protocols vary from highly scripted (structured interview) to relatively loose

(unstructured interview). In the middle of this continuum are semi-structured interviews. This

form of interviewing has some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the

way issues are addressed by the participants (Dunn, 2005). Thus, it was chosen for this study

because it is the most effective and convenient means of gathering information and has the

capability of disclosing essential and often hidden facets of human behavior (Kvale &

Brinkmann, 2009). Semi-structured interviewing is also foundationally based in social

conversation, which allows the interviewer to modify the style, pace, and ordering of questions

to evoke the fullest responses from the interviewee (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Most importantly, and

critical to this study, it enables the interviewee to respond in their terms and how they think and

uses language (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

At the start of the interview, participants were asked for verbal consent to participate in

the study and have their interviews recorded. Additionally, participants were asked to select a

pseudonym to be used throughout the interviews to maintain their confidentiality. I then begin

the interview, which was guided by the interview protocol (Appendix C). The protocol included

questions about the participant's background, perceptions of student success, identification of resources, and experiences that shaped how they conceptualize their college learning experience. All participants who completed the interview were also provided with an electronic list of resources (Appendix D).

Data Handling Procedures

Interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom and a digital recorder. The files containing the interviews were uploaded onto a hard drive on a password-protected computer. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in written form after the conclusion of each interview. Any identifiers in the interview (including, but not limited to, name, postsecondary institution, city of residence, etc.) were removed to ensure participant identities are kept anonymous. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to ensure their names are not identifiable. The digital audio recordings were deleted and removed from the hard drive after transcription. Participants for this study were adults who were18 years or older and participated voluntarily. I realize the topic of past trauma and experiences in the school could be distressing to participants. To address any risk of possible discomfort participants may experience, I provided as much detailed information as possible in the informed consent to allow participants to make a fully informed decision about whether they wanted to participate. In the informed consent, I explained the procedures and the possibility that talking about past traumatic experiences might invoke strong emotions. Participants were free to terminate their participation in the study at any time. My experience as an adviser and past training in interviewing allowed me to recognize possible distress in participants to respond to their needs (e.g., offering to slow down or take time) when a participant appeared to become emotional about a topic. To further ensure participant wellness, all participants were provided with a list of resources available at their postsecondary institution and local community

organizations to get support if the topic of this research study elicited an emotional response (See Appendix D for a sample). Additionally, the specific name of the postsecondary institution or community in which the institution is located is not identified in this study or in any publication or presentation.

Data Analysis

Because this study sought to discover some of the underlying structures of how students with a history of trauma made meaning of their college experience, this study's analytic methods embarked in an in-depth, exhaustive, systematic, and reflective analysis of the data. Phenomenological reduction requires the researcher to take a holistic perspective by viewing phenomena from every side until the essence of it is discovered (Moustakas, 1994). This happens by leading back to the source of the experienced world's meaning and viewing participants' experiences in a fresh and open way (Moustakas, 1994). There are several steps associated with the phenomenological reduction that are relevant in this proposed study. These include horizontalization, removing repetitive statements, and combining salient statements and themes into a "coherent textual description of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Horizontalization refers to giving all participant statements, equal importance during the research process. Here, each interview's written transcripts are coded independently, revealing noted themes that emerged from the data. Next is imaginative variation. Husserl and Frege (1977) asserted that the function of imaginative variation is to arrive at a "structural differentiation among the infinite multiplicities of action and possible cognitions, that relate to the object in question and thus can somehow go together to make up the unity of an identifying synthesis" (p.63). This process was used to form a structural description of the essence of trauma-based on the participants' experiences to address the "how" of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The final

step in phenomenological reduction is the Synthesis of Meanings and Essences (Moustakas, 1994). This step is meant to synthesize textural descriptions to portray the meaning and essences of the phenomena.

A phenomenological study is meant to provide a rich and thick description that captures the phenomenon's essence, which allows the reader to understand the participants' lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). All the steps require reflexivity from the researcher and an ability to, "attend, recognize and describe with clarity" (Moustakas, 1994, p.93). After all interview transcripts and research journals were reviewed, I assigned initial codes into overarching themes (Moustakas, 1994). Assigned codes were based on the initial impressions of the data after completing horizontalization and the data reduction process. To develop initial codes, I used a phenomenological data analysis procedure in which each statement was grouped under a thematic label or meaning unit (Creswell & Clark, 2007). After the initial codes were developed, I then searched for broader themes to succinctly describe the findings. After initial data is coded and assigned to broader themes, Moustakas (1994) recommends a process of verifying themes called final identification. Each significant statement and the corresponding theme are checked against the participant's individual transcripts in this process. This step is critical in proving to substantiate all the findings' accuracy through reference to the raw data. Once I completed the analysis of the data, I followed with a critical analysis of the research study to verify that: (a) concrete, detailed descriptions were obtained from the participants; (b) the phenomenological reduction had been maintained throughout the analysis; (c) essential meanings had been discovered; (d) a structure had been articulated; and (e) the raw data verified the results.

The final stage in phenomenological reduction is the synthesis of meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I constructed structural descriptions that describe how the

experience occurred (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The structural descriptions

may include contextual and environmental factors that were influential in the experience of the

phenomenon. These will be presented with direct participant quotes (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

As with any research study, the responsibility for establishing the trustworthiness of the

research process and truthfulness of the analysis is critical. To ensure this, I utilized member

checking and peer examination techniques to enhance validity. Member checking is the

participants' ability to recognize their experiences in the research findings (Candela, 2019). For

this study, I will provide opportunities to understand and assess the participant's intended

meanings or actions, correct errors and challenge what may be perceived as wrong

interpretations, provide the opportunity to volunteer additional information, and share

preliminary themes/analytic categories to ensure that I am accurately translating the

participant(s)' viewpoints into data. This was done formally as opportunities for member checks

arose during the normal course of observation and conversation at the interview phase. After data

was analyzed, I shared a list of themes with participants. This assessment technique decreases the

chances of misrepresentation but, more importantly, ensures that participants' voices are

accurately described in the interpretation of data. Peer examination is based on the same

principle as member checking but involves the researcher's discourse of the research process and

findings with colleagues who have experience with the proposed qualitative methods (Krefting,

1991). It requires the researcher to work together with one or several colleagues to examine the

researcher's transcripts, final report, and general methodology. Afterward, feedback is provided

to enhance credibility and ensure validity. In this process, a debriefing session(s) with the peer(s)

was scheduled after data collection. Here an examination of transcripts, documents, handwritten

notes, and recorded interviews was discussed, serving to keep the researcher honest and contribute to a more in-depth reflexive analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Positionality

"In phenomenological investigation, the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know," and thereby making "the researcher…intimately connected with the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 15). In acknowledging this, Lietz et al. (2006) suggest that the researcher's stance should be made explicit at the forefront of the study to inform readers how the researcher may impact the study's construction of meaning. Furthermore, understanding the researcher's stance adds to the study (Merriam, 2009). Given my professional experiences as an adviser and recruiter, my interest and connection in this study is rooted in my day-to-day interactions with students. My experience to some capacity makes me deeply connected to vulnerable student populations and ignites a drive to fully understand trauma-informed approaches in higher education from the perspective of students who have experienced trauma. As a doctoral student in higher education, I also realize the value and need to obtain knowledge on this topic to enhance the application of trauma-informed approaches that inform policies and supportive measures needed to establish environments that foster success and increase retention in postsecondary education. Thus, my investment in broadening the knowledge of trauma research in education has shaped the questions I asked in this study and continued to shape how I approached this research. Additionally, my experiences with trauma also shaped the nature of the interviews and the types of information participants were willing to disclose.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the current study methodology and provided further detail regarding the sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures. More specifically, this study

employed two modes of data collection utilizing methods consistent with phenomenology. The

first mode of the collection was obtained via an online questionnaire to determine participant

eligibility. Once participants with a history of trauma were identified, data collection was

employed to interview each participant.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter will focus on the experiences of 10 students with a history of trauma attending a four-year public university in the mid-western part of the United States. First, a general background of the students and their characteristics will be outlined to frame their similarities and differences. This chapter presents the findings of the study using an interpretative phenomenological methodology. This overview then leads to an in-depth look at the emerging themes supported with direct quotations from the participants to add a rich texture dimension. The data collection followed Moustakas (1994) process and utilized member checking, field notes, and mind mapping to analyze the rich data collected from the participants.

General Background

The pre-screening process for this study included the Life Events Checklist (LEC). This survey is a brief, 17-item, self-report measure designed to screen for potentially traumatic events in a respondent's lifetime (Price & Stevens, 2009). It was used in this study to identify candidates with a history of trauma. The questionnaire also concluded with a brief demographic survey (Appendix A: Part III), capturing age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, income, pre-college environment, student classification, and college classification. All participants who participated in this study attended the same 4-year public university in the mid-western region of the U.S. All participants had completed at least three full years or a minimum of six semesters of college. The sample included two undergrads, seven graduate students, and one alum who had already completed a Ph.D. program. Three of the participants were non-traditional students of whom two self-reported having children as dependents. Though most participants grew up in a traditional family settings, one respondent reported that her grandmother was a primary caregiver during her childhood. Another respondent reported her father dying at a young age and being

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raised by her mother and older siblings. Participants in this study were a diverse representation of racial/ethnic backgrounds. One male and nine females participated in this study. Pseudonyms were used in this study to maintain the anonymity of all participants.

Table 1: Deidentified Participant Demographics (Pseudonyms)

Participant	Gender	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Student Group Population (self-reported in interviews)
Sam	Female	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	First-Generation, DACA
Vanessa	Female	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	First-Generation
Rosie	Female	Jewish and Caucasian	Non-Trad, Veteran
Scott*	Male	Black or African American	International Student
Abbie	Female	Middle Eastern or North African	Non-Trad, International Student
Silvia	Female	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	First-Generation
Caroline	Female	White	First-Generation
Jazmine	Female	Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander or other	First-Generation
Yaya	Female	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	First-Generation, Non-Trad
Patricia*	Female	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	First-Generation

Note: reference Table 1 to Appendix A: Part III.
* all students transferred to the university with an exception to Scott and Patricia

This study selected 10 participants who were 18 years of age or older, were enrolled or planning to enroll in college, had completed three or more years of undergraduate course-work, had completed the online survey in its entirety, and indicated qualifying traumatic lifetime events as measured on the LEC. Study participants were asked to complete the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) questionnaire used to assess prevalence rates of childhood adversities. This 10-item self-report measure was designed to identify childhood experiences of abuse and neglect and how participants experienced trauma before college. The questionnaire also served to prepare participants for the interview to think about their perceptions of student success, identification of resources, and experiences that shaped how they conceptualized their college

learning experience. Findings from the ACE questionnaire will be discussed in the later findings of this chapter.

Participant Descriptions

This section provides context to the participants' experiences through a brief description of each participant as an individual before introducing the results of this study. Each participant had unique experiences and perceptions as a student with a trauma history during their educational journey to postsecondary education, interactions with peers, faculty, staff, and the community. This section is intended to introduce readers to the participants to understand how the individual is represented in the findings. A general overview of the participant is provided for each participant.

"Patricia"

Patricia is the youngest of four siblings in her family. Her family migrated from Mexico to the U.S. in search of a better life and opportunities. Though she was born in the U.S, she often struggles with the plight of merging both her identities as a young Latina and American. Being the last-born in her family, Patricia often gets overwhelmed in having to handle responsibilities to support her parents, her older siblings and their families. She has often had to give up her time to care for her nieces; time that she acknowledges would have made her a better student and perhaps, granted her access to more scholarship opportunities. She also feels invalidated by some of her siblings in the account of her personal struggles and the pressure she has had to endure. This is due to the burden of blame and feeling of guilt she sometimes experiences due to her sibling's depiction of her as the youngest and most "advantaged" because she never really experienced the hardships they did growing up in Mexico. Such assumptions have only made efforts to cope with her personal trauma worse and isolating. Through Patricia's personal story,

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one can feel from her voice the pressure she has been under and the urgency needed for her to let it out. Despite all the frustration she has endured, she is a successful student (even though she does not feel like she is). She just completed her undergraduate degree and will be starting her Ph.D. program in one of America's top private colleges in the Midwest during the fall. Getting to this point in her life was not easy. During the interview, Patricia talked of times where she felt alone. She relied on a combination of support systems to help her succeed, some of which failed to fulfill the level of support she needed. Though she acknowledged the few professors, staff, and peers who did help her persist, she is aware of the sacrifice and hard work she gave to get where she is.

"Yaya"

Yaya is a non-traditional student who just completed her master's degree. She has managed to complete her program while working full-time in the university and raising teenage children. When asked how she did it, Yaya mentioned her husband's support and how much he took on some of the responsibilities to help focus on her schoolwork. Yaya's family migrated to the U.S. when she was a young girl. She recalled the struggles her family went through such as food insecurity and homelessness. Recalling the memory of this trauma struck Yaya to tears as she expressed a time her parents told her that they were evicted. She disclosed that as a child, going through the pain of eviction can become a permanent experience. Part of Yaya's childhood adversity shaped who she became today. She knew she wanted better for herself and worked hard in school to ensure this. Yaya also reported about her time in k-12 education where teachers and advisers undermined her intellectual ability because she was bilingual. She gave a voice to the issues students from culturally diverse backgrounds endure in the system due to the negative stereotypes that poorly assume their intellect and skill set. Nevertheless, Yaya's struggles only

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made her stronger. She talked about always wanting to own a home like *The Waltons* - an American drama television series created by Earl Hamner Jr. about a family in rural Virginia during the Great Depression and World War II. She achieved her goal and is now a homeowner! Yaya has also served as a mentor and adviser for several Latinx and underrepresented students. She is well known and appreciated by students and staff she has cared for and supported throughout the years.

"Jazmine"

Jazmine is a first-generation doctoral student, wife, and a mother to a little girl. She moved from the Islands to pursue her education. She described her transition into the university setting as an isolating and challenging experience. Because she is a first-generation student, Jazmine felt like she had no one, especially family members or relatives, to whom she could turn to throughout her experience. Even though assimilating to college life had its struggles, Jazmine also felt pressure from her parents to complete college in order to fulfill their wishes. She recalls the rough times she went through and needed to reach out to her family for encouragement but felt like their response or feedback did not help her since they could not relate to what she was going through. Throughout Jazmine's college experience, she has felt alone or isolated, but she has continued to persist. Though she felt like her timid spirit may have hindered her potential to achieve more, she has accomplished more than she gives herself credit for.

"Caroline"

Caroline is a graduate student who is almost done with the completion of her Ph.D. She comes from a childhood full of trauma, where she endured an unstable upbringing with her biological parents. She reported being sexually abused as a child, having a "strange" abusive relationship with her father, witnessing alcohol and drug addiction of her parents, and most significantly, the

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death of her grandmother who was her primary caretaker. She expressed how these experiences affected her growing up especially considering the issues that had connections to attachment and belonging. Despite it all, the trauma Caroline experienced influenced her to pursue an education path that would prepare her as a professional who can offer the same help and support she needed growing up:

> I'm a lifer for counseling! I've been in counseling on and off my whole life…I really truly believe in it and I tell my clients that all the time…(Caroline)

"Silvia"

Silvia is a first-generation student who recently completed her undergrad. Her parents, who never completed elementary, migrated to the U.S. from Mexico to pursue a better life and opportunities for their children. She is the oldest of her siblings, and given the accounts of her family dynamics, one could tell she is the backbone for both her parents and siblings. Silvia recalled all her responsibilities from a young age, from helping her parents pay bills online to assisting them with her siblings. Though attending college full-time, Silvia also worked at a potato warehouse. She remembers the long hours and grueling work-conditions she experienced along with her parents and other migrant workers:

> I started working at a warehouse and for me it was very eye-opening…just the experience of working at a warehouse and having to work around people like my mother [who] had never gotten an education at all, and just feeling like really strange because obviously you were the young one around. But to me it was a thing of like I don't want to work like that…I didn't want to see myself in that kind of environment… There were days where I would go into the warehouse at like seven in the morning…and we'd be coming home at 10 at night, and it was the same thing every single day of the week… This is very

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tiring…not just tiring physically, but also mentally because you're standing there looking up the tables all day [and] your mind goes all over the place… That was just something I just didn't want for me… (Silvia)

Despite all the responsibilities from work and family, Silvia hardly missed any classes. She woke up early in the morning and made the 45-minute commute to campus. Depending on her class schedule, Silvia was sometimes compelled to stay on campus from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. or later in the evening. Nevertheless, her desire to succeed kept her going. There were times in Silvia's academic journey where she felt unsupported by some of her professors. These experiences were stressful and frustrating, especially considering the time and money she needed to give up to stay enrolled in school every semester. Despite it all, Silvia's determination earned her an opportunity to study aboard during her junior year in college. She completed her final semester of undergrad, and her hard work earned her admission into a graduate program in a competitive and well-known private college in the Midwest.

"Abbie"

Abbie is an international, non-traditional, graduate student from the Middle East. She described herself as an outgoing person who enjoys learning. The most significant trauma she faced in college was the anxiety in having to learn English and adapt to the new system of education. She recalls having trouble understanding class concepts during her first semester but feeling uneasy about asking questions or participating in class because students would laugh at her. Because of this, Abbie kept quiet in class and disclosed that her feeling to stay silent due to the treatment she received from peers was also an issue most international students were going through:

In the first semester…I [didn't] speak in the classrooms and it's not just me, I have some students [who do] the same thing. It's like when we [are] trying to speak or express

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ourselves or even to answer questions, they actually laugh at you…and even the

professor's, they don't do anything…and this is what makes me and others to not speak

out in all the classrooms… (Abbie)

As time went on, Abbie realized that she needed to do something about it and decided to step

outside of her comfort zone to seek the help she needed to succeed. With support from a few of

her professors, mentors, and resources like the counseling and outdoor centers, Abbie improved

and strengthened her academic and personal lifestyle habits. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

Abbie felt like she and other international student counterparts were abandoned by the university.

Despite the difficulty she experienced assimilating into American culture, as well as the

challenges experienced during the pandemic, she stayed optimistic. She is a graduate student in a

master's program and plans to keep going until she gets her doctorate to become a professor

someday.

 "Scott"

Scott is an international student from Nigeria, a country located in West Africa. Like many other

African students, Scott came to the U.S. with his sister to pursue their education and establish a

better chance at obtaining opportunities in life. As an African male in a U.S. institution, Scott

wanted to bring attention to the gaps of cultural awareness needed to better orient and educate

African students who have been granted admission to American universities. In discourse about

his trauma, Scott was the only participant who reported a life-threatening incident perpetuated by

another student in the university. The incident took place because he rejected a sexual invitation

by a female student on campus. Scott's reasoning behind his rejection was rooted in the

experiences he had witnessed of other African males who got in trouble for having relationships

with domestic female counterparts. As a result, he avoided interactions with female students for

the fear of becoming a suspect to unintended sexual assault allegations. Given these experiences, Scott felt the need to express his desire for the university to better inform African students during orientation on sexual assaults/harassment issues. He wants the university to know that African students come from a different culture and therefore, need more informative orientations that better contrast the law and practices in America, especially in regards to relationships. Scott's insight was enlightening and opened an extensive dialog to some of the recommendations discussed in this study.

"Rosie"

Rosie is a non-traditional veteran student who has actively devoted her time and skills to the university. She grew up in a conservative family from which some of her childhood trauma evolved. In her early twenties, Rosie decided to join the army. Her experience as a female in the army added to her trauma. Rosie recounted the countless number of times when she was raped or sexually assaulted. Rosie also endured the horrific ordeal as a mother learning about the sexual assault inflicted on her children. Though painful and tragic, Rosie did not back down. She made it her goal to influence change in policies concerning child abuse in her community. While listening to Rosie's story, one could appreciate the voice she gave to the Women's Movement and what they have endured over the generations. Her story is a powerful example of female oppression in the military, however, her tenacity is very telling of her survival today. Rosie has defeated the odds and does not see herself as a victim. She allowed herself the time and space to continue healing, and no matter how hard things may get, Rosie continued to affirm these words: "I will not lose!" (Rosie)

"Sam"

Sam is a first-generation and transfer student. Sam is also under the protection of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status. DACA is a U.S. immigration policy enacted under the Obama administration that allows some undocumented individuals brought to the country as children to receive a two-year renewable period of deferred action from deportation and become eligible for a work permit (USCIS, 2012). Her story gives a voice to this undermined and sometimes hidden student population. As a young girl, Sam experienced detachment issues with her parents. Her trauma's pain drove Sam into depression at a young age and escalated into medical issues that affected her physical health. Sam and her family found help through a faith-based program where they could reconcile some of the issues they endured as a family. Sam has a close bond with her brother given the health issues they have both survived together. In considering sources of support in her academic journey, Sam acknowledged her RAs (resident assistants) and peer-advisors.

"Vanessa"

Venessa graduated with her Ph.D. and is now a professional in the workforce. Coming from a traditional Latin culture, Vanessa has had to work twice as hard to prove herself at every level of her educational journey. As a girl, she was sexually assaulted. Vanessa expressed feeling so sad and frustrated to the point that she decided to get a Ph.D. in order to feel like she had control and validation:

> I think feeling that loss of control and also feeling like I didn't have a voice…impacted me wanting to get a Ph.D. Basically in my mind I thought that if I had a degree that was considered to be difficult, like intellectually, and also viewed externally as having weight, like a Ph.D., that I would be like "Holy, you did that!" It's sad that for whatever reason, I

felt like I had to go through such extreme lengths and for such a huge part of my life in

order to feel like I had control, and to feel like what I had to say mattered…it's almost a

little bit embarrassing that I wasn't able to feel like my voice, and my experience

mattered until I had a Ph.D. (Vanessa)

Vanessa also voiced the importance of access to counseling, especially for students dealing with

mental health issues daily. Despite her obstacles, she also gave meaning behind the power of

trauma and how with accessible and adequate support and resources, learning to "repackage"

one's trauma can ultimately be crafted into their "superpower."

General Reactions

I prepared for interviews by first taking time to intentionally acknowledge the biases I

had towards students with a history of trauma. I kept a personal journal to note my thoughts and

reactions towards anything related to this study that came up for me during or outside the

interview process. This journal helped me incorporate my thoughts to outline some of what I was

thinking and what I was experiencing during the interviews. Although each interview was a

unique experience for me as the researcher, a consistent emotional reaction that kept recurring

before and after every interview. These emotions were gratitude and inspiration. I felt immense

gratitude for all the individuals who gave me their time and trusted me with their story and felt

inspired by the incredible life stories each participant endured and survived. I experienced how

brave, hardworking, gifted, resilient, and inspirational each participant was. Each participant

experienced significant challenges before and during their college experience and described a

mix of supportive and unsupportive agents and environments. Nevertheless, it did not matter

what obstacle or barrier they had in their way, they persevered and persisted despite what the

system may have expected of them and demonstrated significant growth despite their trauma.

Reactions to Participants

Journaling was utilized as a critical part of the analytical process in this study. Concerning its significance, I journaled my observations about each participant during and after each interview. During the transcription process, each interview's recordings also helped recreate the experience and emotion I felt from each participant through the dialog. The following vignettes describe how I, the researcher, experienced each participant.

Patricia – Patricia was my first participant in this study. I experienced her as an individual who was bold and eager to make meaning of her trauma. Her young and passionate spirit gave a firm voice to the tolerance of generational trauma Latin X students have had to endure. The observations of frustration and pain in her story set the tone for this study by preparing me emotionally for the weight and responsibility to better understand the underlining themes unpacked within the stories of students with a history of trauma in this study. I experienced Patricia as a strong person who will make a difference in others' lives and will continue to experience academic success as she proceeds on her journey as a graduate student to start her Ph.D. program in the fall.

Yaya – I experienced Yaya as a vessel of knowledge and wisdom. As a non-traditional, first-generation Latin X female, Yaya not only served as a voice in her accounts but also advocated the voices of students she has empowered throughout her career while serving as a full-time staff and graduate student. I valued Yaya's story because she was the only student who disclosed a trauma history of homelessness and food insecurity in the interviews. While recounting this history, Yaya acknowledged her inability to revisit such memories without feeling some pain and sadness as she began to tear up. My experience with her confirmed not only her overall connection and advocacy for students but also the empowerment she has been able to cultivate in

others and herself in acquiring her education and new ownership of the home she had always dreamed of having.

Jazmine – Jazmine was the third participant in this study. I experienced Jazmine as a lone survivor who has endured a consistent, isolated experience in her academic journey. As a first-generation student of color, Jazmine left her family from the islands to pursue her education. Her story also revealed the often yet hidden toxic tactics of "guilt" or "shame" families in communities of color utilize to "motivate" the goals and accomplishment of their children. Such overwhelming triggers in fearing failure and disappointment to her family weighed heavily on Jazmine's mental health and academics in her postsecondary experience. However, her ability to adapt and navigate postsecondary education despite her experiences were very telling of her resilience. As I listened to her story, I often wondered if she was aware of her tremendous success and accomplishments. I wished she could see herself through my eyes. Overall, I experienced Jazmine as a survivor in many aspects, but unlike other participants in this study, she has endured her postsecondary experience with little to no support; yet she has persisted.

Caroline - I experienced Caroline as forthcoming and open in telling me about her life experiences and significant trauma she experienced. Caroline challenged my perception of the social encounters of persons with a history of trauma. At first glance, one would not expect that her life history could contain the extent of the trauma she disclosed. She is bubbly and easy to connect with. Caroline was also one of the few participants who disclosed a suicidal attempt in her story. However, what I found fascinating about Caroline was her understanding and connection to death. Given her trauma experiences to loss, she redefined and made meaning out of her personal experiences with death. Caroline's survival of trauma has transcended into her dedication to connect and serve others in her current career as a licensed counselor.

Silvia - I experienced Silvia as strong, resourceful, and resilient. Silvia was the fifth person I interviewed for this study. She opened my eyes to how systems can have a lasting impact on educational opportunities. Silvia's barriers and bad educational experiences did not prevent her from persisting and exceeding her postsecondary education. Silvia was the only participant who disclosed having to work in a warehouse picking potatoes to support her family and pay for school while attending college full-time. Despite the limitations to time and finances, Silvia never made any of it an excuse to triumph. She made the 45-minute commute to campus every time she had classes and went out of her way to seek out the support and resources she needed to pursue other opportunities. Her persistence and hard work earned her a spot in a graduate program at one of America's top private colleges.

Abbie - I experienced Abbie as an upbeat and warm woman. As a non-traditional Middle Eastern international graduate student, Abbie knows all too well what it feels like to be an outsider. However, unlike many international students I have encountered before, Abbie goes out of her way to form connections with domestic peers and community members. When we met for our interview, she greeted me with a big smile and started a natural conversation right away. I felt connected to Abbie when she described her postsecondary education experiences with people underestimating her, laughing at her accent in classrooms, and treating her accordingly. I appreciate her positive and optimistic spirit and can relate to how she was treated. I see a lot of myself in Abbie. I found myself needing to be aware of this connection throughout the interview to not over-identify with this participant. Abbie is driven and independent. Her love for learning and passion for advocating for international students is admirable.

Scott – I felt a sense of responsibility to honor Scott's experience and hoped the questions I developed in my interview protocol would elicit responses that would fully describe his experiences. Scott is a Nigerian international student who is outspoken and honest. He was the only male participant in this study who disclosed experiences that threatened his life. Throughout his story, Scott not only gave a voice that represented the international student community but also revealed the prevalence and silent bias of sexual assault experiences among men. It was a learning moment for me to listen to Scott's accounts on this topic, which opened a significant contribution that could better serve international student education.

Rosie – I experienced Rosie as a dynamic individual who strives to overcome the effects of her violent trauma history every day. Rosie is a non-traditional and veteran student. She recounts her sheltered childhood as the "stereotypical, racist, confederate-flag-flying, drunk redneck" family where she walked around barefoot, and that was all she knew until she enlisted in the army. Rosie's military experience gave a powerful voice to female veterans' experiences as she recounted the oppression of sexism, sexual abuse, and harassment she had endured in the army. She mirrored her sexual assault experiences in the army barracks to the same experience females endure in college dorms, classrooms, and workspaces. Despite Rosie's violent history with sexual assault, she learned to overcome, thrive, and make meaning out of trauma.

Sam - At this point in the study, many of the participants described the negative experiences leading up to their postsecondary education. I almost expected the same from Sam but that was not the case. Though Sam has a history of trauma, my experience of her was very uplifting. She is a first-generation and DACA transfer student who so boldly spoke of the alternate ways she has learned to live her life despite the limitations she has been presented with to maneuver within the system. I found myself reflecting on Sam's interview as I listened to other participant

recordings and noted several themes she discussed related to other participants' experiences. Her description of these experiences gave me hope, and I noted the simplicity of what the RAs and Peer Advisors provided to make her feel supported. Though Sam has more limiting barriers to financial aid opportunities because of her status, I do not doubt that her personality, perseverance, and gratitude will take her far.

Vanessa – I experienced Vanessa as a go-getter! Though a first-generation student, she was the only participant who had already completed a Ph.D. At one point, Vanessa cried in her interview, and I cried along with her as she acknowledged that her accomplishment only confirmed the bias and invalidation she had been fighting against her whole life. Her story revealed the pain and invalidation students of color often experience in education. She acknowledged that she was driven to pursue a Ph.D. to be validated or valued as an individual. I also experienced various emotions in this interview, including sadness, anger, and frustration toward the people who hurt her in her childhood and the systems that did not protect her. However, Vanessa referred to how she has learned to make meaning of it in her ability to interpret beyond people's words through their actions.

Themes

In this section, themes that emerged from the focus group interviews are discussed. Four central themes and fourteen secondary/subthemes themes emerged. These themes are presented below, including participant quotes that provide a rich and thick description of the participants' experiences. The main themes are categorized as follows: identity, experiencing trauma, navigating academic success, and participant's experiences with posttraumatic growth in their postsecondary journey. Within each central theme are subthemes that will also be supported with participant quotes.

Identity

Identity refers to the individual factors that influenced the decision of participants to pursue postsecondary education. *Figure 1: Identity* demonstrates a visual map of the subthemes that emerged within the central theme of identity.

Figure 1: Identity

Note: reference Figure 1: Identity to Appendix F: Diagrams of Themes
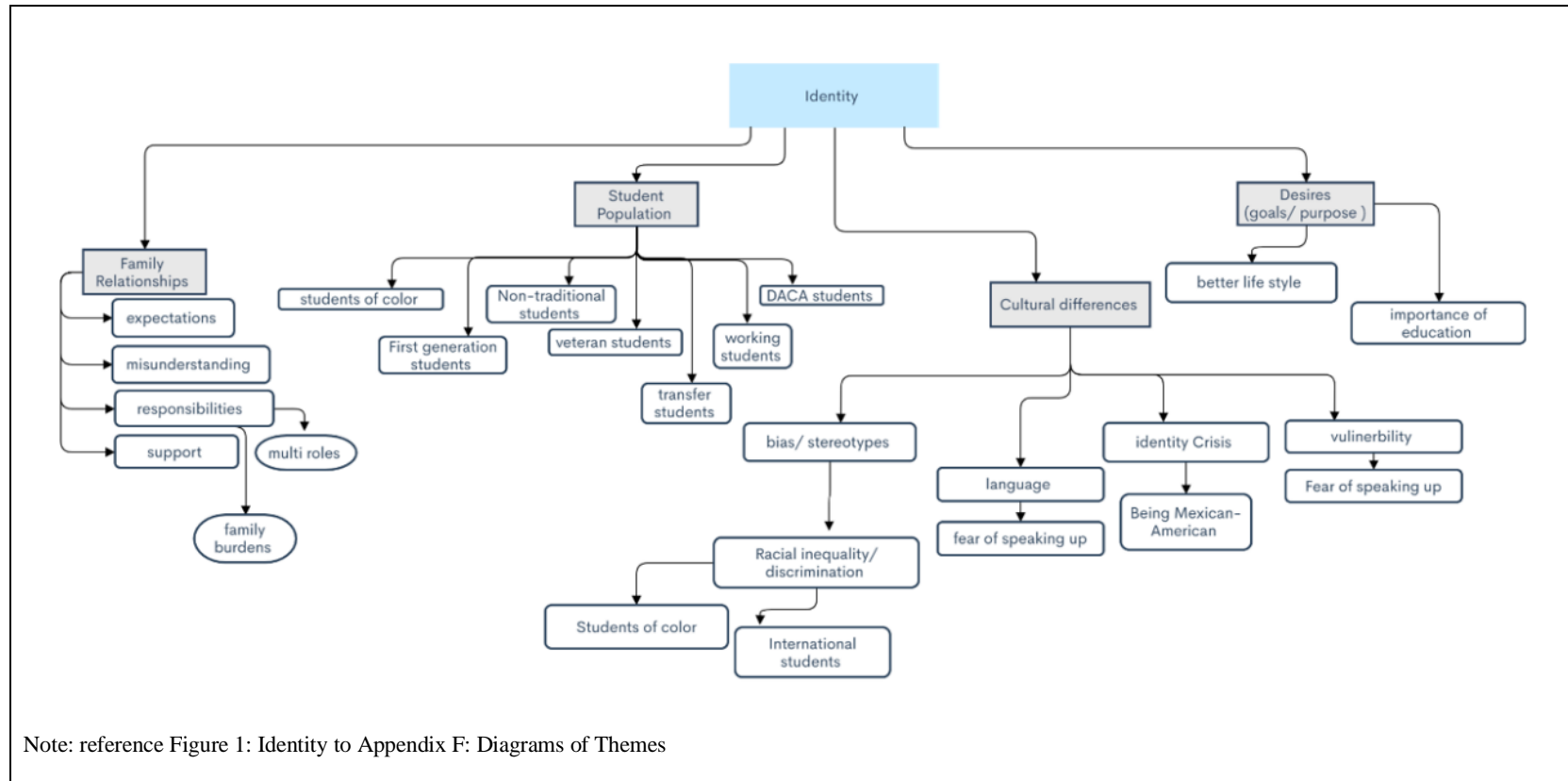
The theme identity included family, the type of student population each participant identified with, cultural differences, motivators, and desires/goals in life. For most of the participants, factors that impacted their decision to attend college were influenced by family circumstances, the value of education, and aspiration to help others. Participants endorsed this theme. Though most participants did not know what they wanted to pursue in college or how and where to start, their family dynamics and trauma history played a significant role in their decision to persist in postsecondary education.

We start the dialog of this theme with Vanessa, who always knew that she needed to get an education. For her specifically, education was not a choice; it was a requirement and more of what she needed to do to get there:

> My dad grew up in Mexico, and loved learning and education but he didn't have the means to go. So, it was […] kind of a story that we always talked about, and then visiting Mexico and seeing the lack of opportunities to get an education in the place where he came from…it was almost like I didn't even think about it, it was just something…I was going to figure out how to do somehow. (Vanessa)

Yaya also provided insight into the reasons that drive students of migrant parents to pursue higher education. She explained that for most of the students she has worked with, the struggles of their parents are one of the primary reasons they feel compelled to go to college: "…I've noticed with some of my students […] it's that they see their parents work and…that [they did] not have the education…" (Yaya). Silvia echoed some of what Yaya described and added that her identity as a Latina, a child of migrant parents, and being a first-generation student played a huge role in her decision to enroll in postsecondary education:

A lot of it is connected to me and my identity and who I am today...I think definitely my

parents' stories and just the fact that I've come from, you know, just being a first-

generation student …its who I am and it's what motivates me to continue doing what I do.

(Silvia)

Patricia understood what her parents had sacrificed to provide for her and her siblings in

America. Going to college was important for her because her parents did not have that

opportunity. Because of this, her father knew that his children would have a better life with an

education, and therefore always advocated for them to pursue one:

I grew up being the youngest of four and ever since we were young, my parents, [who]

immigrated here from Mexico…didn't get the opportunity to go to school…they grew up

with very limited resources and that's kind of why they wanted to come to this country to

give us a better chance of survival… not just surviving but actually having a life worth

living. And so, my dad, he's always been a huge advocate of education…they worked at

warehouses in the field and all that and [he] just wanted a better life for us than that…

(Patricia)

Motivators

The theme "motivators" includes a variety of things that personally motivated

participants to seek postsecondary education. Participants often described being motivated in

different ways simultaneously. For example, some participants described being internally driven

to succeed in school and, at the same time, being motivated to have a different life than their

biological parents or family members. Some of the personal motivations to persist were either so

they could educate, assist or advocate for others who had endured similar life experiences. Sam

expressed having an interest in various subjects, which made it challenging to identify a major

when she started. However, she kept going because all she wanted to do was to help people with her education:

> I'm a huge nerd about all subjects…I love all kinds of subjects and in fact, it was really hard to choose a major for me to study in college, but all I wanted to do was to help people. (Sam)

Abbie also expressed her love for learning but what motivated her to enroll in college was her personal goal to achieve a doctorate so she can someday become a professor:

> First of all, I like to learn as much as I can [in] different fields. I studied sociology, and I studied business administration and I have another master's here in health education and now I'm [doing] political science. So, I like to know everything about the science[s]. However, the second and the most important thing I continued on to finish my doctorate is because I want to teach… and to be professor, you need to [have] at least a masters or doctorate…So this is my intention…this is my goal…(Abbie

Cultural Differences & Language

Cultural differences, which were primarily evidenced through language, was another subtheme that emerged within the central theme of identity. Some participants expressed how their culture and language sometimes bore conflicts or barriers among peers, faculty, and staff. Being seen or perceived as "different" by peers and school personnel influenced how they were treated and how they perceived themselves. Some of the participants described this dilemma as experiencing an identity crisis due to the burden and struggle of balancing the cultural, linguistic, or physical differences of their identity. Patricia explained how though her parents migrated a long time ago to America, they still have not fully assimilated into American culture. Because of

this, she finds conflict in maintaining relevance to her Mexican culture through her parents while simultaneously being American and maintaining her American identity:

…I feel like a lot of students who are underrepresented students, first-gen or from low-income backgrounds like we have a lot of like identity issues…I felt like I went through an identity crisis, like I don't know what I am; who I am; what I want to stand for and go through. (Patricia)

Yaya is aware that her culture and background sets her apart from other students in her class and recognizes her obligation to maintain her culture with her family, however, she acknowledges the dilemma of having to exist in two worlds simultaneously:

Cultural experiences and norms are going to differentiate white societal institutions from students like myself, so having to navigate and fulfill my cultural obligations to my family, as well as to the other institution are what differentiates me and the fact that I think have one foot in one world and one foot in another world. (Yaya)

Like Patricia, Silvia also affirms experiencing an identity crisis and describes her experience as being on the "fence" to negotiate who she is since she cannot fully be Mexican nor American:

I think a lot of us once we grew up here in the U.S, we have this like identity crisis, where it's so hard for us to identify ourselves…if we want to consider ourselves as Mexican or American…we're like on the fence; we can't say either…I can't fully say I'm Mexican because I've never lived in Mexico…but then, I can't say I'm fully American because I'm still embracing my Mexican culture. (Silvia)

Other cultural differences also perpetuated negative biases and stereotypes, especially with students of color. Silvia and Yaya recounted how having a Mexican background negatively impacted how people perceived their academic potential or intellect. They often felt undervalued

by peers, faculty, and staff who sometimes advised them to pursue more technical, hospitality, or secretarial careers because their abilities and Mexican identity were undermined or seen as incapable of persisting in postsecondary education. Yaya recounts dialogs she use to have with her high school advisers regarding her career trajectory:

> I was always routed to the technical route…so I think it took me a really long time because I had to find it out on my own because I feel like those things were already predetermined for me. (Yaya)

Silvia shares a similar frustration by expressing what differentiated her from her peers in this statement:

> I don't know anyone [else] that was put down so many times in high school and was seen by their peers in high school as somebody that was never going to accomplish anything better. (Silvia)

Regarding identity, some participants also shared experiences that isolated them because they felt undermined by peers and faculty who failed to recognize and acknowledge the intellect and potential as bilingual students. Expressing these experiences elicited some frustration and the need for education systems to change how bilingual students are perceived and treated in the classroom and campus spaces. Yaya shares her pre-college experience in classrooms where teachers and peers perceived her as less intellectual because she was bilingual:

> I was the only Latina sitting in a classroom. I know two languages but even though I know two languages, I was never given credit for knowing two languages…I was still looked at as maybe "not as smart." (Yaya)

Silvia also recounts the discouragement she received as a bilingual-speaking student in elementary: "I went through elementary or high school being told I couldn't speak Spanish

because you know this is America and we speak English here" (Silvia). Language cultural

barriers are also experienced by international students who study in U.S colleges and

universities. Abbie recounts being laughed at by her peers in class because of her accent and

confirms that such humiliation causes international students like her not to speak up in class:

"There's a stereotype about international students, especially from the Middle East...

They don't practice it that much and it's well known that they don't speak [in] the

classroom because of that…they don't want anybody to laugh at them and people [who]

hear them [speak] are like, "You are in the college. You should be fluent in English, you

should speak clearly" but I don't know why some people…don't have this maturity to

respect people [and] how [they] speak or if they have an accent and English is not their

first language…And this is the things that I want to mention here…if you have another

language, like second or third language, this is actually a challenge…if you have a second

language or third language, this is talent…I think we actually need to encourage

professors and administrators to know that this is a talent and to respect that even more."

(Abbie)

The cultural prejudice regarding language is not only experienced in the classroom but also

transcends across various campus environments. Silvia describes an encounter she had with her

friend on campus:

There was a time that I was even walking through campus speaking in Spanish with my

Spanish friends and having two girls make fun of us because [we were] speaking in

Spanish…I wish I could have said something but my friend was like "don't" like "ignore

it" but they were like making fun of us and [saying things] like "see, I could speak

Spanish too" and they would try saying things that [mimicked] Spanish….it was

ridiculous. (Silvia)

Family

Family played a huge influence on each participant's identity, life aspirations, and

decision to pursue postsecondary education. However, the burdens and responsibilities within

each participants' family unit presented unique challenges. Patricia recounted that she had to

grow up fast given the responsibilities she already had, such as helping her parents pay for their

mortgage, handling other financial responsibilities since high school and helping her sister who

suffered from domestic violence with her children:

> Just having to be the person to kind of like help my family cope through that and be there
>
> to take care of her, her child and her step-kids…I really had to step up and take care of
>
> that situation on time. (Patricia)

In addition to this, Patricia often felt like she could not say 'no' in circumstances where her help

was requested or needed. This affected her education as she often had to serve her family's needs

over her educational needs. Silvia further confirmed this reality in having to manage and take

care of her family's financial needs and health issues:

> It hasn't been just me carrying the fact that I had to go to school worrying about my
>
> homework or all these courses. It was also having to worry about family problems, and
>
> making sure my parents are really paying their bills on time because they don't know how
>
> to use any kind of websites to pay their bills. So, I've always had to manage that for them.
>
> And my younger brother went through a phase where he had suicidal thoughts…it was
>
> very, very hard on my family and I had to carry that and I was in a toxic relationship
>
> too…it was really, really hard. (Silvia)

Patricia further explained the lack of understanding some faculty have concerning the multiple roles and identities students also hold in their personal and work lives. Students outside of the campus environment may also have complex roles and responsibilities that can impact their overall academic success. She explains it this way:

> I feel like there's a lot of layers to students that are hidden from them (faculty) and obviously, we don't want to display that trauma all the time…But there's a lot that happens and impact students in the classroom coming from cultures like me…it's just ever since my childhood, there's a lot of stuff that has happened in my family that we haven't healed from. (Patricia)

Regarding family, some participants, especially those who were first-generation students like Jazmine, felt unable to confide in family for support due to the lack of understanding of the postsecondary experience. Such instances left them feeling isolated and limited:

> Well the struggle was when I had those days where I just had a rough time…(and) I needed to reach out to my parents (but) my parents didn't understand the struggle of being in this level of education and all they could tell me was "do your best" … I don't even have other family members that (have) experienced post-secondary education and understand what I've gone through. So, I'm still limited. (Jazmine)

In summary of this theme, participants in this study indicated that identity had a huge impact on decision to attend college. Identity was primarily shaped by family, their primary environment, and cultural background. While in college, most participants felt as though cultural differences differentiated them from their peers. Cultural differences like language greatly impacted how they were perceived and treated by faculty, staff and peers. Also, some faculty are unaware of the multiple roles or responsibilities students hold outside of the campus environment

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and how that can affect academic success. Finally, first-generation students like Jazmine lack

support in various areas including their family units. This is due to the family's unawareness of

what the college experience is like.

Experiencing Trauma

Experiencing Trauma refers to the circumstances and experiences of the participants

before arriving in college. For some participants, experiences of trauma reoccurred to them while

in college. *Figure 2: Experiencing Trauma* demonstrates a visual map of the subthemes that

emerged within the central theme.

Figure 2: Experiencing Trauma

Note: reference Figure 2: Experiencing Trauma in Appendix F: Diagrams of Themes
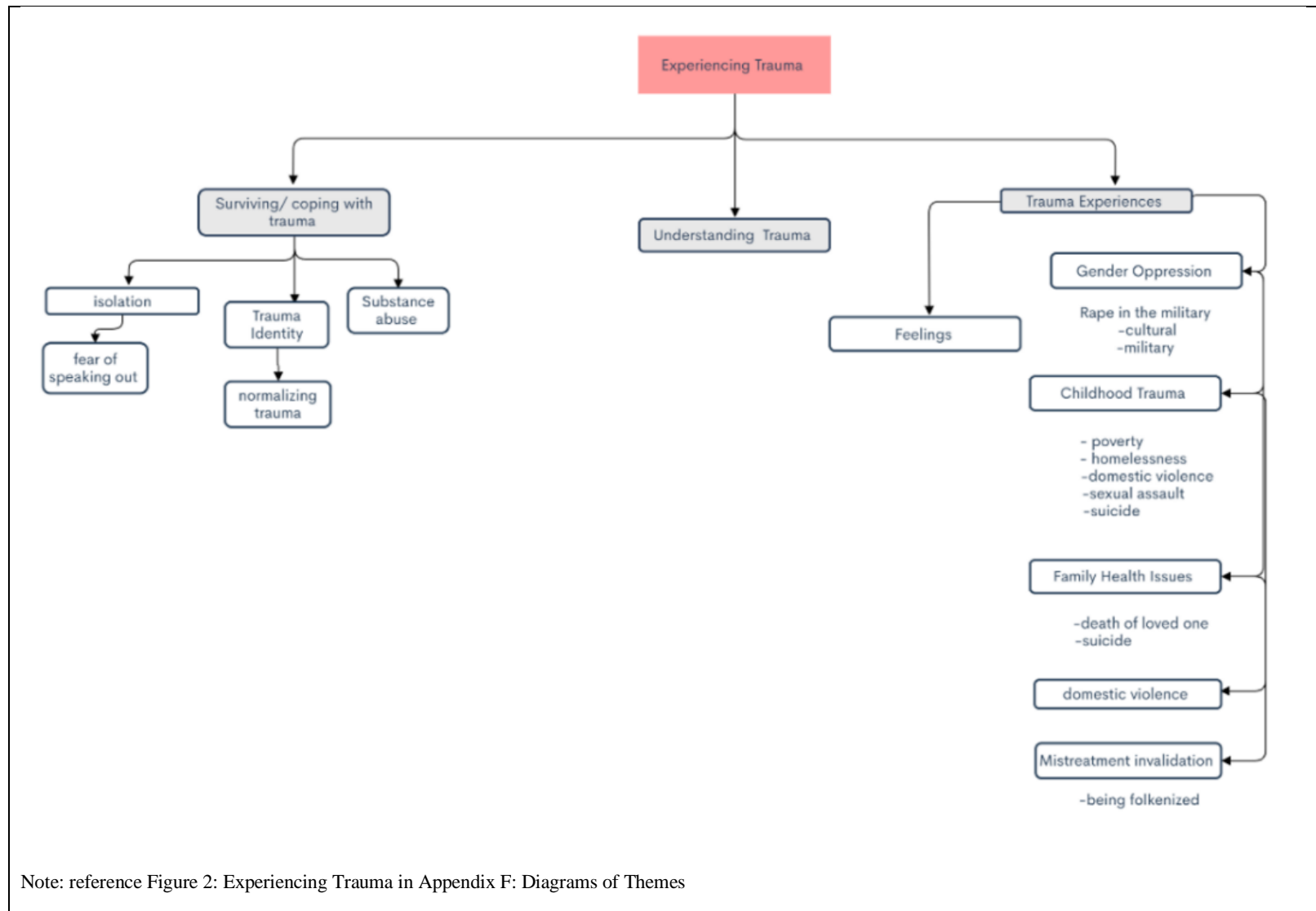
All participants endorsed this theme by describing traumatic experiences that influenced or impacted their academic success and overall life perception. This theme refers specifically to the trauma itself and the emotional impact it had on the participants. Secondary themes that emerged within this overarching theme were: trauma experiences, emotional impact, surviving and coping with trauma, normalizing trauma, and understanding trauma. A description of each secondary theme and supporting quotes are listed in this section.

Trauma Experiences

In assessing trauma experiences, sexual assault was the most identified trauma experienced by participants before entering postsecondary education. One participant recanted experiencing sexual assault while in college. Some participants referenced emotional reactions to abuse, while other participants described the abuse they endured without noting any emotional reactions and noted abusive situations that happened in a 'matter of fact' manner. Vanessa explained how her trauma experience perpetuated the isolation and invalidation she felt growing up because it took away her sense of control and made her feel like her voice did not matter:

> As a kid…one of the most traumatic things that happened to me [was] I was sexually harassed as a young adult...I was still a kid. I was 15. I think feeling that loss of control and [made me] feel like I didn't have a voice. (Vanessa)

Scott's trauma experience drove him into isolation, and just like most males who experience trauma, Scott never spoke about it:

> I didn't want to (intimately) spend time with somebody…and that person almost hit me with a car because of that. On purpose! She knew I was the one trying to cross the road. Normally, you're meant to stop for the pedestrian…she stopped but then speed up. If I

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didn't move back I could have been crushed there that night, and no one will know who killed me. But I never spoke up about that. (Scott)

To Rosie, it was apparent that her experience with sexual assault in the military was done to demonstrate power and control. Her experiences make her angry as she is still struggling to understand why society feels like females need to be treated this way to exercise control or dominance:

It's all about power…they had to devalue me before I even arrived in the country and then they went after my body that first night…it's all about power, "how can we keep women down?" "How can we keep girls down?" …. It kind of frustrates me and I get a little angry about it…and it infuriates me because it does not make sense…I mean, there is no reason that women and girls [should be] held down…literally and figuratively. (Rosie)

Caroline's experience with trauma propagated suicidal thoughts as a young girl. It was only after finding her devastating suicide note that her mother realized she needed counseling:

I was sexually abused when I was a child, and then I just had a lot of trauma symptoms that came from that obviously and then had a very strange abusive relationship with my father. And so that led to me thinking a lot about suicide…when I was 12. And I actually wrote a suicide note and left it out in my room and my mom found it. And that's when she was like "you need to go to counseling…" (Caroline)

Patricia's sexual assault weighed heavily on her part because she did not feel the support she sought from her siblings. The blame her brother put on her for attending the event where the assault took place left her feeling guilty, isolated, and empty in dealing with her trauma: "…it took a toll on me…being used and being taken advantage of that in that sense…I often felt like empty and not worthy." (Patricia)

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Emotional Impact

Emotional Impact refers to the participant's description of the emotions participants experienced before, during, or after trauma. All participants endorsed this theme and noted the varying emotions they had in response to the trauma they experienced in their home, social, and school environments. Participants referred to general experiences emotional impact had on their academic success, thereby causing phycological and health implications such as lack of trust, depression, and isolation during their postsecondary experience. Emotional Impact as a primary theme is explored below with supporting quotes. Sam shared that her emotional response of fear from her traumas have limited her but at the same time, made her careful and protective over the safety of others:

I've noticed that from my past trauma, I respond so much to fear…so fear is a huge impact that my (trauma experiences) has given me, but also looking out for others, you know. (Sam)

For Jazmine, her trauma's emotional impact resulted in low self-esteem and confidence to put herself out there and seek out challenges:

It really impacted or influenced my self-esteem in the way I go about advocating for myself, and also again like cultural limitations where I'm a female…I look back and there are so many opportunities I wish I took but I was so timid, because…I felt low or alone or didn't feel like I could [do it]. And so, I think it (trauma experiences) really hindered the possibilities I could have achieved when I was in school. (Jazmine)

Patricia dealt with emotional pain that caused frustration for her. She spoke about some of the pieces of generational trauma perpetuated against females in culturally diverse homes in that

whenever someone is assaulted and speaks up against it, members in the family are quick to accuse or extend blame rather than offer understanding, support, and healing:

> It (trauma experience) just made it feel worse and so on top of everything that I've already had to go through and just like process with my family…experiencing that and just feeling not interested and being blamed for it or just being called names and then having, you know, like, when it happened, just having to deal with like STDs…it just made me feel so trashy and not having the understanding from my siblings; it just hurt because it wasn't like I asked for it. (Patricia)

Coping with Trauma

Participants in this study utilized different methods to cope with their trauma experiences. Positive and negative coping methods ranged from substance abuse, working long hours, seeking counseling, or isolation. Jazmine expressed how some practices like domestic violence were normalized in her culture. Having to deal with this type of trauma on her own made her feel alone because there was no one who could relate to her experience:

> I had some personal stuff...just talking about drugs, or like domestic violence which is very huge in my culture. So yeah, a lot of personal stuff and I just felt isolated… because I felt like other people weren't, I guess, maybe had similar experiences. And so, I just shut down in that classroom like every time I went…it was a very troubling semester. (Jazmine)

To deal with his trauma, Scott used work as a means to cope. He also acknowledged that having a supportive roommate to do things with like watching a movie helped him cope with his trauma:

> I have to seek comfort in a place I know that I can think about it and working in a care facility at least gave me time to, you know, think towards it. And also having a

supportive roommate was also beneficial because I could, you know, come back home,

have a time to watch movie, go to bed or do my coursework. (Scott)

Because Vanessa's trauma caused her to lose a sense of control, she inflicted self-harm as a

coping mechanism to externalize the pain she felt inside. She also acknowledged that living with

her sister helped her cope with what she was going through:

Not all of my coping mechanisms were good ones. In high school…I would cut

myself…I would do self-harm. And it was mostly like a control issue and kind of

externalizing the hurt that I was feeling inside. So I don't recall if I did go to therapy in

undergrad, I did live with my sister for some time and I think that really helped kind of

with the changes that came from moving out of my parents' house, and going off to

college. (Vanessa)

Eventually, Vanessa did seek professional help and counseling and was placed on medication to

help her mentally cope with everything she was going through. Though Caroline's history

portrayed the tragic consequence of alcohol and drug addiction, she also struggled with the same

habits as a means to cope with all the trauma she had experienced throughout her life: "I

definitely have had some of my own struggles with alcohol dependence, or with substance use,

which is a hard thing knowing that it ruined my parents' lives." Ultimately, Caroline expressed

that the work she does in addition to the company she has from her pets and peers help her heal

from her trauma:

I get so much healing from the work I do with my clients as well. And I have two dogs

that are the cutest things ever. That's a big coping resources for me because it is my dogs.

And then I'm married to my partner as well… I'm an extrovert like I really rely on my

friends to help me through some of those things. (Caroline)

While coping with trauma may take different forms or practices for survivors, Patricia acknowledges that the experience of trauma never leaves you but rather becomes a part of your identity:

> People that go through trauma don't really truly heal from it. I mean, it's something that comes up time and time again. And you know, depending on the day, it can be really bad on some days... But that's just something that stays in your mind and it takes a toll on you all the time. It's just something, some life history that you have to live with. (Patricia)

Normalizing Trauma

Due to the repetitiveness of trauma exposure, some participants in this study also described the practice of "normalizing" trauma as an emotional response to cope. Patricia explained her practice of normalizing trauma in ways of thinking that either justified or validated her experiences:

> I think just all that internal trauma with my family…going through that and seeing that…from a young age, I normalized it to the point where I always thought, "Oh, well I'm glad I'm going through this because it's teaching me to be responsible "and "I can manage all this stuff and get all this done." But now, the more I learn, it's like that wasn't normal. It's not okay to be having those feelings and having that unprocessed trauma and not having anyone to turn to and feeling guilty all the time for doing something or not doing something. That's not normal. That's not okay. It's not healthy to be normalizing those type of behaviors and those experiences in my life. (Patricia)

To Jazmine, normalizing trauma was entirely an acceptance of her personal experience and effort to make meaning out of it:

It's almost becomes a norm…that's my experience. I think that's kind of why there's still

this itch inside of me where I still want to pursue my Ph.D., or do something…write a

book or something to share my experience, because it's just like I have that huge piece of

me that has not been exposed yet. (Jazmine)

Understanding Trauma

Understanding Trauma evolved as a theme referring to the descriptions of participants

who reported how they came to understand and learn about their trauma: Sam explained it as

taking the time to learn and understand your personality and how you make sense of things

through your emotions in order to create or give meaning to the circumstances you have been

dealt:

It's all about knowing your perspective, knowing others perspective's and understanding

your own limitations. We're all human; we all have emotions and we all are going to

respond differently due to our unique personality traits…We all are given scenarios,

events, situations, opportunities but [it's] for us to learn, interpret them, and respond in a

way that we should, to live better our life. (Sam)

Rosie learned that the best way for her to manage her trauma is to recognize and quickly respond

to anything that could potentially overwhelm her so she can deal with it right away:

What I've done with anything that could overwhelm me related or not to the trauma is I

approach it head on. I'll go to the instructor [or] email the instructor… It takes

vulnerability to do that and I had to take that leap of faith…(Rosie)

In summary of this theme, participants in this study indicated the traumatic experiences

they encountered and how it impacted them emotionally. Emotions had positive and negative

effects on participants health and phycological wellbeing which directly impacted their academic

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success. Participants utilized both positive and negative practices to cope. To make sense of their

trauma, some participants normalized their experiences by either validating it as part of their

day-to-day life or ignoring it all together. Finally, participants continue to seek understanding

and make meaning of their trauma identity.

Navigating Academic Success

This primary theme refers to the participant's experiences in various campus

environments and the personnel and peers during their time in postsecondary education. These

environments include the classroom, labs, offices, student union areas, and the host

community. *Figure 3: Navigating Academic Success* demonstrates a visual map of the subthemes

that emerged within the central theme of Navigating Academic Success.

Figure 3: Navigating Academic Success

Note: reference Figure 3: Navigating Academic Success to Appendix F: Diagram of Themes
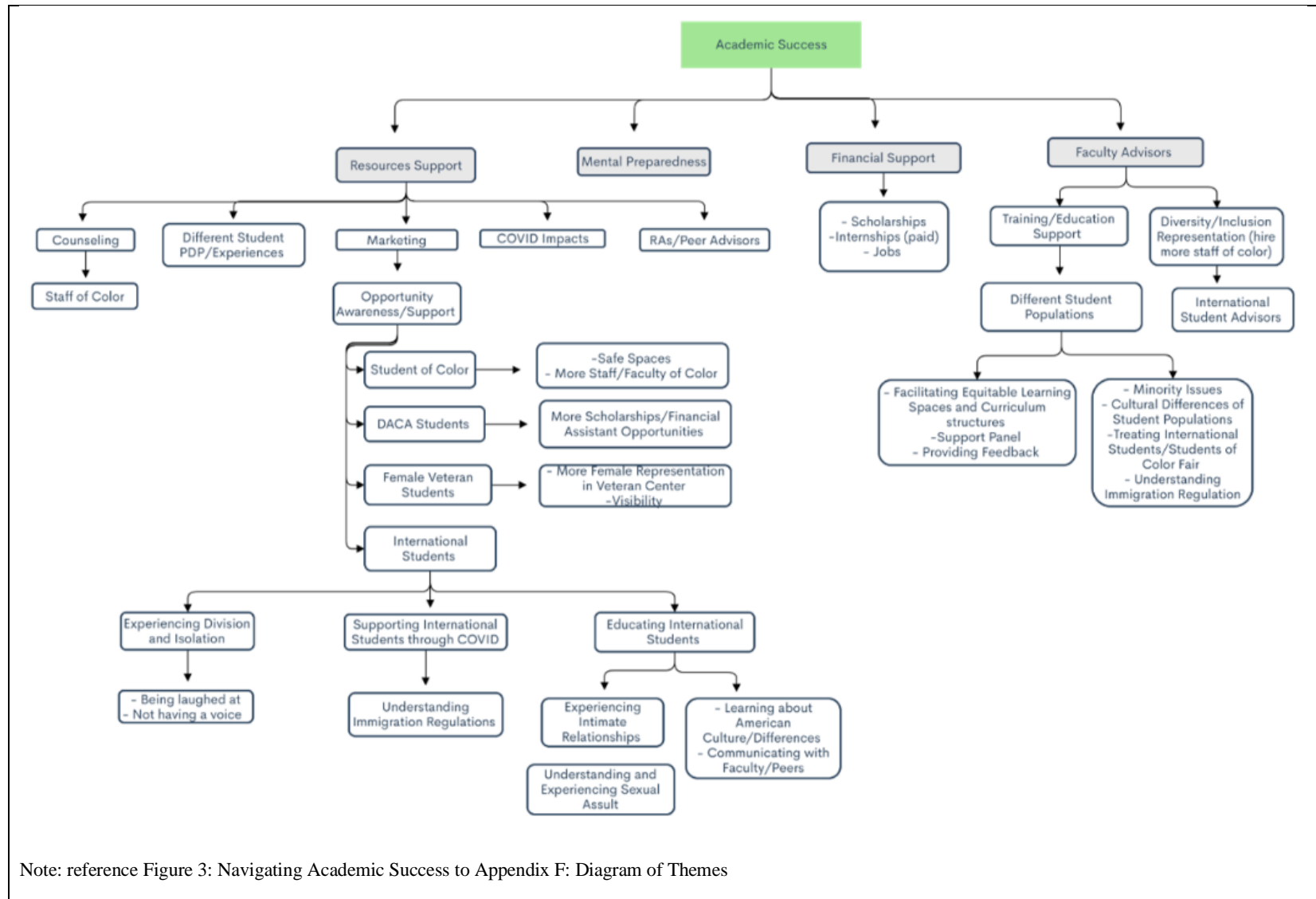
All ten participants are aware of the impact trauma experiences had on their learning in postsecondary education. Secondary themes include college readiness, academic impact (including the academic impact that participants are currently experiencing in postsecondary education), trauma-informed education and spaces, and impactful connections. Descriptions of each secondary theme and supporting quotes are listed below.

College Readiness

Participants in this study expressed how lost they felt during their entry in postsecondary education. We begin this dialog with Silvia, who expressed how fearful she was about going to college because she did not know what she was doing or how she would get it done:

> It was already a big scary step for me because I knew I had to get an education. I couldn't let my parents down, but I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. So, for me that was very, very scary. (Silvia)

Patricia felt like the trauma she was enduring in addition to the responsibilities she took on for her family became overwhelming and affected her potential to develop and perform to her fullest potential:

> I feel like it kind of exploited my college years…I feel like my growth was intellectually, I guess, stunted mentally because I didn't know how to deal with all those emotions and everything that I was feeling and going through. (Patricia)

Academic Impact

This secondary theme is about the participant's experiences with academics while having a history of trauma. There were varying degrees to which these experiences were positive or negative and impacted learning and academic performance. For some participants, the academic curriculum gaps, socioeconomic status, and cultural background led to current academic

challenges in their postsecondary schooling. Supporting quotes for general academic impact and impact specific to postsecondary experiences are listed below.

As a DACA student, Sam was very aware of the burden her education would put on her family's finances. Generally, DACA students pay the same rate or more as international students and cannot obtain any financial aid from the federal government:

> I'm a DACA student. I had no financial gain at all from the federal [government]. I only had one scholarship that they (the university) had given to me…and I greatly appreciate how much it helped me…I had a lot of stress and frustration you know. I had a lot of moments where I felt really sad or when I felt like I was either taking too much from my family…almost 10 grand for the semester…it was a really rough time last year. (Sam)

Scott expressed that because he isolated himself, started working more hours and getting his schoolwork done, he did well academically during the semester of his trauma experience than he had ever done before:

> It gave me leverage to focus more on my education… I think experiencing a lot of things made me focus (in school) …. So, for me, it really helped me a lot because I think my first semester I started working so hard, trying to use work to distract myself. I think I got a 3.9 (GPA) that semester. It really helped me cut off from those things and stay away from certain things. (Scott)

As a non-traditional student, Rosie had to re-learn everything about being a student in college. She declares that despite everything, her determination and hard work earned her all the opportunities she received:

> In my first semester, I didn't really talk to many people because I was over 30, I had forgotten how to learn and how to study, and that first semester was really to re-learned

how to learn, if that makes sense. I got back into it and then I started volunteering

because I love to do that and getting involved…and my grades earned me opportunities

because I was a good student. The more I got to know people, it was truly the first time in

my life that people cared about what was in my head, what I had to say. (Rosie)

Trauma Informed Staff & Spaces

Collectively, the participants attended one specific postsecondary institution. Participants

in this study described experiences with school environments where they felt safe and connected

or disconnection and isolated. Caroline begins this dialog proposing the need for trauma

awareness training or education for everyone, especially faculty in higher education:

Everything just needs to be a trauma-informed system…that just needs to be the case no

matter what. People need to be educated more on trauma…and just the wide range of

trauma experiences and how that can affect a person… And I think any class needs to

start with the assumption that all of your students have experienced trauma, and they're

going to be triggered by what you're talking about, especially in a counseling profession

where it's so personal. (Caroline)

Other participants described how the availability or unavailability of cultural informed spaces,

curriculum, and diverse staff impacted their education. Rosie, a non-traditional veteran student,

felt like it was the first time she had been treated with respect regarding her academic potential:

"I was a scholar and I was treated as such. And that's what I expect for myself… that equal

treatment of our minds…. you know based on the work merit not gender based." (Rosie).

However, Patricia felt isolated in various academic spaces, especially the classroom, due to the

lack of diverse faculty and staff who could understand and connect with them:

Just having that person who has that diverse background, experiences…intersection like me…and then having that [assurance] like "it's okay to be you and it's okay to be this way" in the classroom and those academic spaces. I think it would make a huge difference in students who have these traumas... (Patricia)

Participants also expressed the need for diverse faculty and staff in the classroom and locations that provide support services like the counseling. Vanessa shares her thoughts:

I think it's important…having access to therapy, therapists…I don't care if it's group therapy or anything…When I was going through some of the toughest times in graduate school…the waitlist to get to a counselor [was] ridiculous. Like, it's unreal…you basically have to be on the verge of self-harm or suicide or something in order to get in to see someone immediately, and that's unacceptable…. I think there's a lot of value in…having people a diverse group of people, not just culturally, but also from diverse experiences in every field. And some of us who need therapy I think can contribute…but we have to get to the finish line and if that requires therapy and it's not available, then people are losing out. (Vanessa)

Abbie felt that the same representation and support is also needed for international students to help them navigate the university, its resources and host community:

I feel like we need to have a section or group of people [to represent students] from different countries [that can help] navigate them as international students and be ambassadors for them…just let them know it's (the university) home for them, like a second home for them. (Abbie)

In addition to facilitating trauma-informed spaces, Rosie expressed how spaces for veterans can better accommodate female veterans through marketing and advertising efforts. She also expressed the need for spaces where female veterans can have a voice:

> You know, even visibility, signage, posters of female veterans…. more emphasis on bringing women's support to the [veteran centers on campus] …There's a lot of posters (representing female veterans) that could be brought upstairs.…There's much work to be done but on an everyday application… I say to the people [who] think it's impossible to ask yourself why do you think it's so hard to create an open space for young girls and women to say "I was raped and I'm not ashamed of it?" I don't know how many times I've been raped in the military…but I can say honestly with integrity that I was never ashamed then and I'm not ashamed now because I refuse to bear the shame and the guilt of the people that hurt me. That's on them. (Rosie)

Trauma-Informed Awareness in the Curriculum

This secondary term evolved in the descriptions of participants who felt that the curriculum structures failed to recognize underrepresented students' cultural barriers and their experiences. The unawareness of underrepresented students' cultural identities and experiences in the classroom can sometimes affect academic success. Jazmine describes her experience:

> Our program was the counseling program and we kind of decided that I wanted to go into the Family Marital and Couple branch of it. The struggle was the fact that counseling was not something that was acceptable in my culture or understood; mental health is not very prominent in our culture, and when we got into the family portion (topic of discussion), it was just very hard to feel understood when I did identify some challenges with our work (assignment) that we were doing in the class…I'm like, "I can't do this" like the family

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tree, genealogies, I was like "I can't complete this assignment because I don't have this information"…I couldn't do it…I just had a huge struggle because I felt like they didn't hear where I was coming from when I said that this wasn't comfortable for me to complete. (Jazmine)

Concerning this, administrators need to be aware of the training and resources for faculty to support diverse student populations. Such awareness will assist faculty in making their curriculum more accommodating in creating content and utilizing teaching methods that take into consideration the barriers students might be facing from various cultural backgrounds. Scott made this distinction as he recounted an experience in which he was required to testify to the character of a friend (who was also an international student) regarding a sexual assault allegation. Because of this experience, he recommended the need for curriculum reform during international student orientations to also focus on sexual assault:

There was a student who was deported for some certain reasons of sexual misconduct. What I want to make clear is that, as an international student, we attend the orientation. For a fact…sexual assault is wrong, [no matter] where you're coming from or where you're going…but one thing is that these people lived in a different culture…This person was a friend and he was deported, and I know that some certain things he did was wrong but at the same time, I wanted to rise up some issues or questions to the school: what sort of orientation was given to this international student on how to communicate with domestic female students? …what is the training, advice or workshop that is offered to international students on how to communicate or have a relationship with a domestic student? They need to explore more on doing that because these are things [they] don't even discuss. (Scott)

In addition to curriculum accommodations to better support students, Silvia expressed the significance of faculty support, implementing rigor in courses, and the importance of receiving feedback about assignments and projects. She recounts a class where she hardly learned anything because it was often canceled, and the professor never provided any feedback on assignments or projects. She also recounts the lack of support from some professors in helping her and her peers academically. This frustrated her because she was promised certain aspects of her education would be taught or fulfilled, but she never received the proper instruction she expected and felt like her time and money went to waste:

> It was really frustrating…I still think back on it and I don't know how I did it and hearing from these professors saying that my success story and getting accepted into (an ivy league university) was thanks to them and just be like "No. It wasn't thanks to you." I had to look for these opportunities on my own. It's been very frustrating…I don't want another student, like myself to go through this, because it's ridiculous and I think nothing is being done in our department. Things go under the carpet. I've had students cheat off of me. I've helped students that needed help writing papers and their teachers not giving them feedback; their professors not telling them, "look, we have these services that can help you write better..." A whole lot of my whole journey at [current university] has been, like we say in Spanish, "just scratching my own self" and it's frustrating because I am a first-generation Latina. I've never gone to college. I don't have anybody else that has gone to a university in my family that can tell me "you're right on track with this," or "these are the resources you need." I had to look for resources on my own that could help me with the things that I was interested in…It was frustrating. Sometimes your professors weren't there to help you. They would just deny you and be like, "I don't have time for

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that. I'm sorry." So yeah, definitely I would have to say that I've pretty much built my

own program for myself. (Silvia)

In confirmation to this, Abbie and Scott also recommended that staff, especially those serving

international students, need to be aware of immigration regulations to better support international

students, especially during a national crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Abbie expressed a

reminder to the university of their responsibility to accommodate international students just as

they would domestic students:

> They are our responsibility…we get them to come to [the university] and admit them, and
>
> then leave them like that? Once we get the responsibility to admit them, then let's think
>
> [of them as] our family…Those (international students) are our family, our kids; [some]
>
> are 18 and 19, and sometimes 17 when they come to this country. So, who [are] the
>
> parents? It's the [university]…. And I think it's not only one person who needs to do that;
>
> it's a cooperation with other departments. Number one is the international students
>
> because they know about the immigration regulations, at least, and [can] interact with
>
> other administrators [to] make a voice…I think the most important thing to think about is
>
> to get students themselves from different countries to be involved in your decision…
>
> include students from everywhere (to help in making decisions) …(Abbie)

Scott confirms Abbie's statement and adds that taking care of international students should have

been the top priority for universities during the COVID pandemic given the additional

restrictions it posed on them in comparison to their domestic counterparts:

> I think international students should be the priority for every university…because they
>
> don't have anyone. The school is their family. So, for me, I think they should be given

more priority than even the domestic students because domestic students have the

resources here already. (Scott)

Impactful Connections

The term Impactful Connections include both positive and negative personal connections

with faculty, advisors, and peers. The trauma-informed school environments they described had

specific people who promoted building healthy relationships (e.g., taking time to listen to

students' voices). These connections stood out as incredibly impactful in their journey to

postsecondary education. Descriptions of this theme and supporting quotes are listed below.

We begin this dialog with Silvia who recognized her professor as a supporting agent who

understood the system and did what she could to support her academically:

> I was just lucky enough that one of my Spanish professors…was always there to help me
>
> with what I needed…She gave me her time and her dedication to helping me. And I
>
> would say she's the only one that really was there for me…She knew how frustrating it
>
> was because she worked in the department…but then I kind of ran away from that
>
> department because I was so suffocated. (Silvia)

Abbie also acknowledged that having the support from professors and staff in her department

gave her confidence not only to perform well academically but also to cultivate healthy habits

like going to the gym and engaging in more outdoor activities:

> My professor, main advisors and [department] chair, help a lot! They helped me a lot to
>
> recognize my talent…and they appreciate what I do…this is was the first step [to feeling]
>
> like "I can do many things….in healthy ways." (Abbie)

Silvia also added that finding and surrounding herself with a group of supportive peers

encouraged her to keep going:

I was surrounding myself with the people that could help me push me when I would fall.

So definitely, I would have to say TRIO for me was a huge lifesaver and [an adviser] was

always there for me [o help with] what I needed and still continues to be there…I was

[also] in my church group…they definitely were always there to help me spiritually and

definitely with work. It's funny. I'm still working there right now. (Silvia)

Like Abbie and Silvia, Scott has also attributed appreciation to the faculty and staff who went

above and beyond to make him feel like he, as an international student, also mattered:

I would like to thank [specific staff member] in Department of Student Affairs. I think the

greatest support we international students had was his office. And I'm happy that many

Africans discovered that office through me because…I went there and I said, "Man, I

have to open up." Back in 2016, Nigeria experienced an economic hardship. The naira

(Nigerian currency) went up in exchange for the dollar…We were frustrated [trying to]

pay our school fees…Who could speak for us? Nobody. But it was [specific staff

member]. He fought nail and tail with financial services that we have to make plans for

these students…and he continued that to his retirement…So I'm really grateful to

him…He was a level of prestige in my archives. He's a very good person and I really

appreciate the time and effort he contributed to assist international students and African

students in general. (Scott)

As a DACA and transfer student, Sam also expressed the support she received from RAs and

Peer Advisors when she arrived on campus:

My RAs…they really helped me and my roommates. They helped us really understand

how to work through things because we were away from home. I was in new state. I

didn't really know much of anyone and I wasn't getting along with my roommates and I

thought I was really [going to] have a breakdown or something like that and they really

helped me…calm down, relax and get by through the semester. (Sam)

In summary, participants' abilities to navigate academic success was influenced by pre-college readiness, participants' experiences in various campus environments, the availability of or lack-of cultural and trauma-informed spaces and the positive or negative connections with faculty, staff and peers. Participants expressed the need for more diverse faculty and staff. They also expressed the need for administration to recognize and support faculty to better implement and extend curriculum content that can serves the learning gaps of diverse student populations.

Experiencing Posttraumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) theory centers on the idea that growth can occur as a result of trauma, and ultimately can have a significantly positive impact on an individual's life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). It is strengths-based and focuses on the idea that individuals who have experienced trauma can recover and grow under the right conditions. As previously described in Chapter II, the five factors of PTG are an appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal strength, relating to others, and spiritual growth. *Figure 4: Experiencing Posttraumatic Growth* demonstrates a visual map of the subthemes that emerged within the central theme of Experiencing PTG.

Figure 4: Experiencing Posttraumatic Growth

Note: reference Figure 4: Experiencing Posttraumatic Growth to Appendix F: Diagrams of Themes
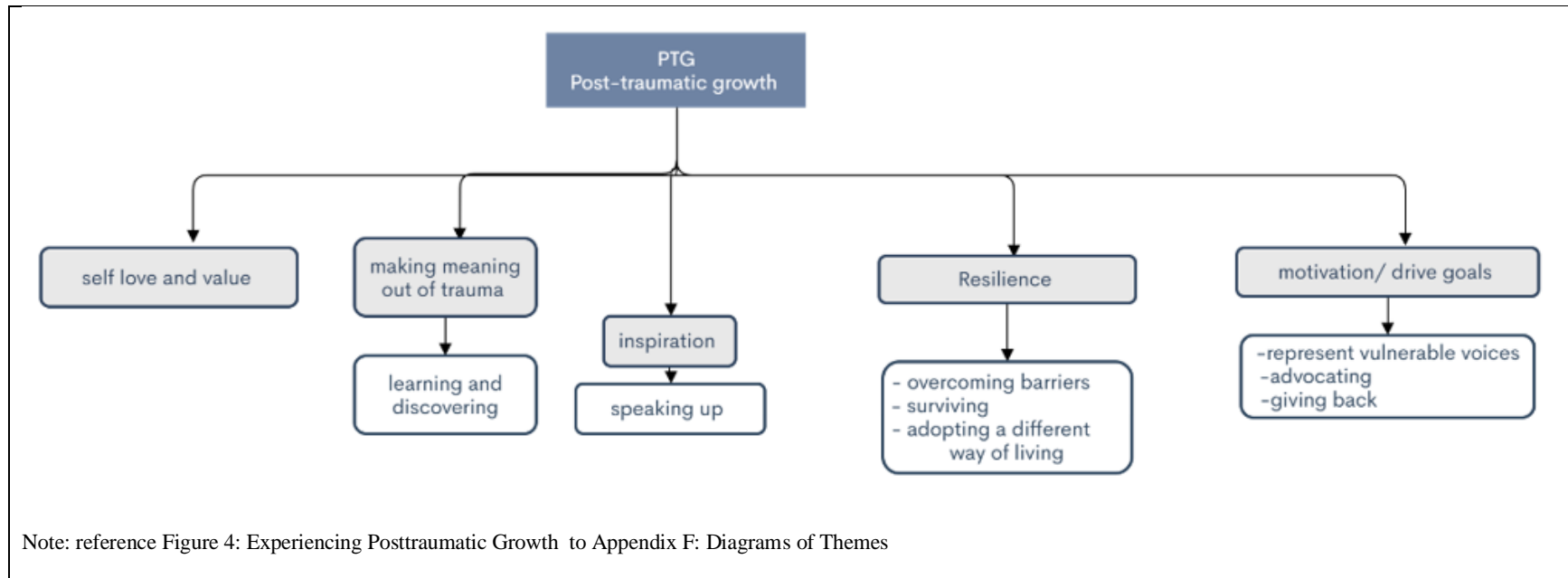
The findings will be explicitly tied to post-traumatic growth literature in Chapter Five; however, descriptions of the five factors of post-traumatic growth are presented with a description and supporting participant quotes below.

Personal Strength: Resiliency & Making Meaning out of Trauma

Personal strength was the most salient secondary theme in this study. Accounts of Personal Strength as a PTG factor are presented with supporting participant quotes. This dialog begins with Yaya, who reframed her experiences of trauma and instead utilized it as a source of strength and motivation to validate her ability to survive any challenge she is presented:

> For me, it really is a driving force…going back to the painful experiences, and then saying I am worthy. Everybody is worthy. And if there is a path and there is a way for me to go down that path, then I can go down that path. If I survived homelessness, if I survived hunger, if I survived whatever trauma, I can definitely survive staying up and getting through finals. I definitely can get this capstone or thesis done... So, I think it makes you stronger because you've had to survive. You're a survivor. (Yaya)

Jazmine also acknowledges that her experiences with trauma as a child equipped her with the mental toughness to handle the obstacles she was presented in college. Though what she experienced in college was not easy, what she had survived as a child was worse:

> I think a lot of it was just my own personal persistence…my own trauma as a kid allowed me to have a thicker skin. So, once I was able to go through college and whatnot, it impacted me but it wasn't the same impact as I experienced as a kid. My trauma as a kid was a lot worse and so I felt like that helped me make it through…it made the trauma, or the experience in college a lot easier. I was able to access my resources and my

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support…So, I think the trauma really helped me not quit…I felt like [that's] what the

trauma has done for me. (Jazmine)

After experiencing trauma, Venessa lost trust in people. Because of this, she developed her way

of assessing or examining people's intentions/motives in her life. She described this habit of

observation as a "superpower" that helped her navigate her environment in college:

Looking back is almost like a superpower because I was just watching people…and I

think part of being from a primarily white state where I had to navigate being one of the

only people of color, I kinda had to pay attention to how I was being perceived or [at

least] that's how I felt… But my experiences [were] that I couldn't just be myself; I had

to also think about how other people were viewing me and making sure that I can, not

conform, but [be] acceptable somehow. And so, I had to be watching people's reactions to

me and watching people's reactions to other people. That's just how I've always had to

deal with, or maybe that's how I was able to navigate during university and [other]

spaces... (Vanessa)

Because Caroline's trauma stems from attachment and belonging issues, she developed an

understanding and sense of support for people going through circumstances of grief and loss. She

too describes her ability to connect with people and offer support as her superpower: "I feel very

called to it. I feel like I'm using like my superpowers basically every day which is amazing"

(Caroline). Rosie acknowledges that her ability to survive all that she has been through only

confirms her confidence in knowing that she is undefeatable:

I will never lose. Nope. Like the word says "they can kill my body" but Romans (book in

the Bible) says "nothing will separate me from the love Christ Jesus has for me." They

can rape me again, they can steal my career, again, they can steal my money again…They

can rape my children, again, they can try to kill my children, again but as a human being,

as a woman, as a mother, as a female, I will never lose. (Rosie)

Trauma survivors may experience an increased sense of their internal strength and the capacity to survive and prevail after the trauma. As noted previously, personal strength is often referred to as resiliency; however, personal strength encompasses much more than being resilient from adverse experiences. Personal strength speaks to the individual's ability to experience growth despite the trauma and be stronger. This growth is experienced as individuals learn and start to make meaning of their trauma. All participants endorsed this secondary theme. Sam, who after making meaning of her trauma, feels ready to voice from her own experience that there is more than one way to live the life you have on earth:

I would really like others to know that there is 100% a different way to live. There really

is! My parents always talked to me that change in a person is responding differently to

the same situation that you have and transforming is changing your basis of emotions

towards your response together. (Sam)

Caroline gave her trauma meaning by fully accepting it as part of her identity. She acknowledges that her trauma has shaped her into the person she is today:

I see it as very pivotal to my identity, especially because I had trauma from the time I was

a baby...it has shaped who I am for the better to worse. So, I really consider it as

a…central part of my identity that I'm a trauma survivor. So that's what it means to me. I

think part of why I am empathetic and relational is because of my trauma. I doubt that I

would be that way if that wasn't the case. So, it's a gift and it's kind of my burden to bear.

(Caroline)

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Vanessa explained that making meaning of her trauma was more like "repackaging" it. Instead of trying to escape the discomfort of it, she wants people to feel it, make meaning of it, and then repackage it in a way that can it can positively serve themselves and others:

> I think we all have different traumas or things that really impacted us and I wish people
>
> would sit with their discomfort…and kind of try to figure out how to repackage it.
>
> (Vanessa)

Relating to Others: Connection, Understanding & Advocacy

This theme refers to how participants felt connected to other people who have experienced similar adverse life events and the motivation to advocate for them. In this study, participants reported having a deeper understanding of other people who have experienced trauma. For Vanessa, she feels an obligation to extend herself in ways that can uplift or advocate for others stating that "I try not to waste the opportunities that I'm given to elevate people (Vanessa)." This is one of the reasons she decided to participate in this study. Caroline's experience with loss gave her a new meaning to life. Not only is she more appreciative of her own life but also wants to help others find the meaning and value of their own lives for themselves:

> Basically, it really helped me think about how life was worth living and helps me rethink
>
> [how] some of that trauma is not my fault. And so, I kind of knew I was interested in like
>
> psychology, counseling, and ever since then, because it was so important in my life, I
>
> really wanted to be that change for other people. (Caroline)

Sam feels like her experiences have given her a more profound comprehension and insight in knowing and understanding the various circumstances people go through in life:

Some of us like us, like DACA students or just about anyone, have gone through

something very specific, something that's been hurtful and they're able to share that story

to show some kind of impact. And that's really what I want to do. I want to share my

story in order to show some kind of…either help or hope…because I prefer someone to

live happily with none of the hurt, none of the hate, none of the trauma, then have them

go through what I [did]. …I've noticed that with a lot of my trauma, I can relate so much

to many people. I can understand where they've been, what they're feeling, what they

could do to better themselves to live happily in a better situation…(Sam)

New Possibilities: Learning and Discovering

This theme related to learning and discovering that manifested from their experience with

trauma. The idea of learning and discovering is described as an individual's ability to respond to

trauma by developing new interests and embarking on new adventures or a new life trajectory.

After the initial impact of the trauma, the individual may discover or change the course of their

life priorities or goals. Through her trauma, Caroline described how the learning and discovering

of her life's passion was developed:

When I was in my undergrad, I took a death and dying class…and we had an assignment

about approaching death in a way you hadn't before. And so, for that assignment, I went

and volunteered at a hospice, and then I took that forward into other internship

requirements for my degree…So, I think back on that, [how] my trauma was directly

related even to the catalyst for me becoming a counselor…I had an experience when my

grandmother died and both my parents struggled on-and-off with substance abuse…So,

my grandmother was really pivotal in raising me and she died when I was 14…So I

remember right before she was dying, I just was so afraid of her and the whole process; I

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just didn't really connect with her at the end and I always felt a lot of guilt about that. So

that's what led me when we had this assignment like "Okay do something that's always

scared you with death and dying" I was like, "Well, I know what it is! I need to be with

people when they're dying." And I realized how important that felt to me to be able to do

that work and to be able to sit with people who were in that process. And it was really

healing of that past trauma of losing my grandmother. (Caroline)

Spiritual Growth

Spiritual change refers to a survivor's ability to make sense of their life after they

experienced trauma (Source). Rosie's response was notable concerning posttraumatic growth as

she described her journey to understand the purpose of the multitude of traumatic experiences

she experienced in her life:

Everything has a butterfly effect. So, you know, that's how I've coped. I've taken care of

my mind, my body, my spiritual health, of course…going from the milk to the meat in

the word (Bible)…. But really conquering the external. And I'll tell you, the only strength

I've had to conquer the external is Jesus Christ. I have no strength. None. So, all the

credit, all the glory goes to the Lord because he's the source. (Rosie)

Self-love and Appreciation for Life

People who have experienced growth after a traumatic experience often describe having a

changed sense of life's meaning. After surviving traumatic experience, they notice things that

may have otherwise been taken for granted before the trauma event. Caroline confirms this

subtheme as she describes how being with people during death helped her live her own life:

I think what I found is that being with people [during] death just helped me live my life a

lot better and appreciate my life a lot better because if you can't acknowledge that then

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you can appreciate life. That's pretty much my perspective. So, it helped me realize that I could always have these kinds of thoughts of my grandmother as I was doing this work because I could appreciate that she would be really proud of me and what I was doing. (Caroline)

For Rosie, she finds significance in the experiences her education has given and exposed her to:

And my education is the catalyst…I've lived different experiences, different cultures and traditions, and I know there's just amazing people out there. I mean, I always inherently knew that, but my education reaffirmed it…my education and experiences I've had especially, have really emboldened me to put up healthy boundaries or maintain them rather. (Rosie)

Conclusion

Rigorous data analysis procedures yielded four themes and fourteen secondary themes, which were described in this chapter. Participant quotes illuminated themes to provide rich and thick descriptions to help readers understand the students' backgrounds, which allows us to glimpse at the forces that have shaped their lives. Each of these students' families has played a crucial role in how they view the world and their life experiences. The positive or negative experiences from faculty, staff, and peers also played a huge role in their academic success. This chapter also showed us how PTG was developed in each participant and that despite their adversity, once each participant in this study enrolled in college, they took control of their academic success.

These findings add to existing literature related to trauma, considerations of the impact of childhood trauma, trauma-informed college education, spaces, counseling literature, and trauma concerning faculty and staff preparedness. In considering the themes that affected student

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success for students with a history of trauma, institutions need to create the necessary conditions

for success. These students' success depends not only on the individual but also on the institution

whose responsibility is to create safe and nourishing learning environments for all students. In

the next chapter, I will discuss these findings and demonstrate how they fit within the existing

literature's more significant context. Recommendations on how to facilitate students with a

history of trauma will also be presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Student retention and persistence is one of the most widely researched topics in higher education, and over the years, scholars have developed several theories to further the literature on it (Dalangin, 2018). Tinto (1957), who espoused the student integration theory, identified three major sources of student departure: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and lastly failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. In his *Model of Institutional Departure*, Tinto also stated that to persist, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems" (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

In examining the factors that may impede retention and student success in postsecondary education, scholars have focused on social support, integration (Tinto, 1987, 1988 & 1998), and the characteristics and behavior of students, as illustrated by the *student-centered research tradition* (Smart et al., 2006). Prior reviews have also focused extensively on financial aid (Burke, 2019; Herzog, 2018; Latino et al., 2020; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015; Southwell et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies have taken a psychological perspective to show that social support is vital for successful adjustment to university life (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017; Holmes, 2018; Holt & Fifer, 2018; Pennington et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). Authors have also found that the broader student experience plays a significant role in students' decisions persist (Cotton et al., 2017; Tinto, 2017). While these studies have documented the importance of pre-college and external factors that shape student success, few studies have given attention to the specific pre-

college and external factors, such as traumatic experiences and mental health. Research has pointed to college students as a population unique in developmental life-stage and culture (Arnett, 2000; Sher & Gotham, 1999) and thus, supports the need to examine psychological phenomena in this population. Though growing research has indicated that issues of retention that impede student success may be explained by experiences of traumatic events (Arria, 2020; Brogden & Gregory, 2019; Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019; Kalmakis, 2020), further research in this area is needed. This phenomenological study contributes to the literature by exploring protective factors that students with a history of trauma utilized to persist in postsecondary education and can provide valuable information for researchers who develop intervention programs for college students to retain and persist in higher education. The investigation shed light on their experiences, and interactions with faculty, staff, and peers, and the lived experience of growth despite trauma. In doing so, I was guided by the following overarching research question and proceeding sub-questions:

1. What are the experiences of students with a history of trauma in reaching and persisting in postsecondary education?

   a. How do students with a history of trauma make meaning of their pre-college experiences?

   b. How do they describe the impact(s) of pre-college experiences on their college learning?

   c. How do students with a history of trauma define student success?

   d. What resources do students with a history of trauma identify in shaping their success?

e. What are the lived experiences of posttraumatic growth for students with a history of trauma in postsecondary education?

To answer the study's questions, 10 participants were recruited from a 4-year public university located in the midwestern region of the U.S. A preliminary survey was used to help identify study participants who met the following selection criteria: 18 years of age or older, were enrolled or planning to enroll in college, had completed three or more years of undergraduate course-work, have completed the online survey in its entirety and indicated qualifying traumatic lifetime events as measured on the Life Experience Checklist (LEC). Each participant had an interview that lasted about an hour and was held via Zoom video to adhere to the 2020 COVID-19 social distancing protocol. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Moustakas (1994) phenomenological reduction method. Four central themes and fourteen secondary/subthemes themes emerged.

The following chapter describes the outcomes of this study. First, I discuss the findings as they relate to the guiding research questions and previous literature. Each section of the findings includes discussion and practical implications for college administrators, faculty and staff, and higher education stakeholders as relevant. Finally, I will explore the limitations of this study and future research considerations.

Research Questions

First, I will list each research question to address a brief overview of the question's findings. Research question one was: *what are students' experiences with a history of trauma in reaching and persisting in postsecondary education?* The data suggest that students with a history of trauma experienced trauma in their home environments before and during their postsecondary experience. The impact of these experiences affected them mentally, emotionally,

and eventually, academically. Their identity and experiences shaped the student's education before and during the college duration. Data indicates the experiences students described before and during college was a dichotomy of trauma and how it impacted connections with family, faculty, staff, and peers. Data also describe the impact these experiences had on their academic performance and ability to learn. Students with a history of various types of trauma described encountering many relationships that were, at times, positive or negative. These connections and relationships with peers and adults before college impacted their motivation to complete a high school credential and pursue postsecondary education. Each of the central themes and secondary themes that emerged from the data will be discussed in later sections within this chapter.

Research question number two was: *how do students with a history of trauma make meaning of their precollege experiences?* One theme and four definitive secondary/subthemes emerged related to this research question. Data related to this research question indicated various trauma experiences with emotions that were either intensely positive or negative. Several participants described the effects of traumatic experiences as something that cannot be cured or forgotten, but rather something they will always live with while trying to make meaning of. I will describe the implications of these experiences as they relate to the field of education for higher administration later in this chapter.

The third research question was*: how do they describe the impact(s) of precollege experiences on their college learning?* Data related to this research question indicated a variety of negative impacts compared to positive impacts on their college learning. Students expressed having stress, depression, anxiety, and PSTD, which impacted their academic performance in college and social interactions with faculty, staff, and peers. These complications also caused physical and mental health issues for some students with direct and indirect impacts on their

learning. In regards to positive impacts, some effects like isolation or alienation improved academic focus and learning.

The fourth question was: *how do students with a history of trauma define student success?* Data related to this research question indicated that students with a history of trauma define success as the ability to persist and complete. Academic success for the participants in this study was also influenced by peers, faculty, and support available to them. Also, and noteworthy to mention, participants in this study utilized what Yasso (2005) coined as community cultural wealth (CCW) for survival and mobility. These included their aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital to achieve academic mobility and success.

The fifth question was: *what resources do students with a history of trauma identify in shaping their success?* Data related to this research question indicated that students in this study identified mostly peers and sometimes faculty and staff of color in postsecondary education as contributors to their success. While services like counseling were also significant, most of the students in this study never utilized them because of the lack of diverse staff. Students also identified the family as a significant component in shaping their success. These experiences were positive, depending on how family supported them financially or negative, depending on the load of responsibilities they were obligated to fulfill.

The last research question was: *what are the lived experiences of PTG for students with a history of trauma in postsecondary education?* This research question can be best described through PTG. Data in this study suggest that all participants experienced PTG to some extent. The students' lived experiences were described in terms of how trauma shaped their personalities and how their growth after trauma continues to impact who they are today. While the impact of trauma was difficult for the participants, they all described how trauma has helped them grow

and become more resilient. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), the five aspects of PTG include an appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal strength, relating to others, and spiritual change. New possibilities and personal strengths were the most salient theme related to this research question. Students' experiences with growth despite trauma went far beyond coping with adversity in that data indicated that students experienced an increased sense of personal strength and an increased capacity to prevail despite trauma. In the following section, I will describe each aspect of the findings concerning existing literature and implications for research and practice.

Discussion and Implications

This section presents the discussion and implications of the themes presented in Chapter 4 that reflect how students experienced trauma concerning their postsecondary education, experiences with university faculty and staff, and growth despite trauma. In the following sections, I will discuss how the findings fit into the body of literature related to students who have a history of trauma in postsecondary education and the university administrators' role in supporting them. I will also explore each of the central themes and secondary themes concerning the theme's implications in terms of research and practice. I will also present potential implications and recommendations for future research in counseling, higher ed administration, and other higher education stakeholders. While findings were explained in Chapter 4, I will contextualize the existing literature findings in this chapter. The implications of this study are intended to inform and benefit higher education and stakeholders as relevant.

Trauma-Awareness Education and Training

Trauma literature indicates that each person will have a unique response to trauma (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). In this study, an example of this is how some participant's

educational outcomes and experiences differed from one another. This indicates that two people with the same exposure to trauma may experience the trauma in different ways and have different reactions to trauma. College administrators, faculty, and staff should be provided with trauma awareness education. Higher education stakeholders could also provide more training and resources to colleges and universities to ensure that campuses have a better understanding of the signs of trauma a student may be exerting in the classroom and other campus environments. College and university systems could address these challenges from a systemic approach in identifying potential safety and well-being concerns on campus and providing resources to support students from this background.

This study's participants are among the small percentage of students who enrolled in postsecondary education despite their trauma history. However, findings in this study are consistent with previous studies regarding the impact of trauma on learning and the importance of educators recognizing how trauma influences the educational experience (Camargo, 2016; Miller & Collins- Nybell, 2013; Pecora, 2012; Riebschleger et al., 2015). Although the students in this study are successfully persisting or have persisted in college, most participants indicated that their trauma experience impacted their learning throughout their journey to postsecondary education, and some participants continue to experience academic barriers and difficulties in their postsecondary education programs. The college personnel, peers, and the community they encountered had an impact on their learning experiences. The college climate, trauma-informed environments, or the lack thereof also impacted students in various ways.

Academic Support

Differences in cultural upbringing could influence the gaps in the academic curriculum of some students. In this study, some participants felt as if college personnel did not care about their

struggles and barriers or completely failed to recognize it. Administrators are responsible for facilitating conversations or data collection from all student populations to advocate for academic and learning supports for students. Without this outreach, it is difficult for the administration and faculty to know about the additional barriers students from various demographics and backgrounds experience in education. Another recommendation for college admission staff is to review student's academic records as they enter college. This is to note potential gaps in the curriculum to provide effective and resourceful recommendations to accommodate transitions or entry to college better. This information can also be obtained by college counselors or support staff to be sensitive to students who have experienced trauma. Schneider and Clark (2018) evaluate institution-level practices aimed at improving college completion rates. Without vital social, emotional, academic, and financial resources, students with a history of trauma are vulnerable to dropping out of their postsecondary degree programs (Montserrat & Casas, 2018). The participants in this study indicated the social, emotional, and financial burdens of college as a stressor. The emphasis of specialized services for underrepresented students with trauma histories should focus on stability (Rome & Raskin, 2017). In this same tone, Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, and Bennett (2017) concluded that critical components of college support programs should include financial aid, housing, and trained staff at universities to ease postsecondary education transition.

Participants in this study spoke to their motivation to continue to pursue postsecondary education despite the barriers they experienced along the way. Participants described being motivated in different ways at different times. The motivators to pursue a postsecondary degree include messages from parents and a means to secure a better future. Participants in this study described the desire to have a different educational and lifestyle outcome than their parents.

Some participants witnessed firsthand the struggles that their parents faced due to not obtaining

education credentials, while others were motivated by others in their lives who earned

postsecondary credentials. Hass and Graydon (2009) found that those who "beat the odds"

attributed protective factors such as a sense of competence, goals for the future, and social

support to keeping them engaged in school and pursuing a postsecondary degree. Participants in

this study indicated that they experienced both types of motivations in their postsecondary

education journey and continuing education. College admission counselors could design

intentional guidance curriculum and individual supports to students to identify the internal and

external elements of their motivation in college. Postsecondary education stakeholders could

work together with colleges to listen to the students' identified motivations and facilitate

individualized support to pursue their goals.

Trauma-Informed Spaces

The participants in this study experienced various campus settings during their

postsecondary experience. The culture of their college, students' socioeconomic status, and

norms within the campus community influenced their academic success. For example, the lack of

diversity in faculty and staff of color made underrepresented students feel like administration,

faculty, and staff were oblivious or dismissive to the needs of students who experienced cultural

barriers, prejudice, or economic hardship. The socioeconomic status often predicts the retention

of college staff and counselors experiencing higher burnout than those who work in wealthier

college campuses (Holman et al., 2018). Yaya endorsed this experience as a student and staff of

color who worked at the university. Not only did she fulfill her duties in her position but also

served as an unofficial adviser/counselor to students of color. Being aware of this may assist

colleges in designing support programs that meet the needs of staff who endure this kind of burnout.

Creating an environment where students with a history of trauma feel safe, connected, and have access to impactful and healthy relationships is vital in recovery (Perry, 2006, 2009; Osher, 2002; Wolpow et al., 2009). Purtle and Lewis (2017) found that a lack of access to trauma-informed environments has resulted in traumatized students experiencing re-traumatization. Some participants in this study specifically recounted an experience where they were retraumatized in college due to a lack of trauma sensitivity by college personnel, including college counselors. For example, an experience that stood out in this study was the university's unresponsiveness to international students during the COVID pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, was an ongoing global pandemic occurring during this study. The outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in January 2020 and a pandemic in March 2020. Due to this, college and university campuses across the nations were closed and moved online. The shutdown affects caused several implications for international students who lost their summer jobs on campus and could not return home because the borders were closed. Due to immigration restrictions limiting international students from working off-campus, many struggled to pay rent and put food on the table. The lack of awareness from the administration to fully understand and support international students' needs during this time made their academic and living experience during the shutdown challenging.

One evidenced-based approach to trauma-informed systems is the Substance Abuse, and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) 's Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed

Approach (2014). In 2014, SAMHSA developed these core principles to develop a shared understanding of trauma and a trauma-informed approach across an array of service systems and stakeholder groups such as child welfare, education, criminal and juvenile justice systems (SAMSHA, 2014). SAMHSA's principles are easily adaptable and can work with a variety of existing programs within colleges. For these reasons, SAMSHA's approach serves as a foundation for discussing participants' experiences in postsecondary systems. College administration needs to continue to receive professional development about trauma-informed systems to facilitate a safe learning environment for all students, especially students with trauma histories. The advances in trauma-informed care provide college administration and counselors an opportunity to advocate for implementing evidence-based programs that support all students (Kenny, et al., 2017).

Impactful Connections

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, this study's foundation is rooted in the assumptions of constructionism in that subjective meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world and people in it (Crotty, 1998). The term "impactful relationships" in this study's results refers to the meaning participants constructed due to their social worlds, and these meanings were not always necessarily positive. The following section will address elements of impactful relationships participants described in this study and the supporting literature.

Herbers, Reynolds, and Chen (2013) found that peer relationships during middle and high school play a significant role in developing identity and self-esteem. Adverse experiences with peers and staff are often factors in participants' negative academic outcomes with a history of trauma (Benbenishty, et al., 2017). Invalidation by faculty, staff, peers, and some environments'

overall negative climates was a prominent subtheme in this study. Research participants expressed their experience with invalidating interactions they encountered during their experience. Invalidation can involve refusing to respond to student requests and questions, singling out a student in front of their peers, not responding to student emails or phone calls, and embarrassing students. Overall, students in this study were intellectually prepared and confident with their ability to be successful. However, some participants reported that when they sought out to engage further in their learning with certain faculty members, they were made to feel incompetent and unsure of their abilities. Most of these experiences were linked to their cultural identity. Specifically, invalidating experiences in this study occurred in an academic setting among students and professors. For example, bilingual participants were treated negatively by faculty and students. Some students interested in gaining more in-depth information about their assignments were thwarted away by certain professors' negative interactions while other professors did not care to respond. Whether invalidation was discriminatory or embarrassing, it still could disrupt a student's educational journey. Invalidation from faculty, staff, or peers was an important finding given that social capital and supportive relationships are essential upward mobility (Agneessens et al., 2006; Bell & Romano, 2015; Coleman, 1988;).

Supportive relationships are a critical protective factor during K-12 education and higher education for students with a history of trauma (Biehal, 2012; Day et al., 2012; Dill et al., 2012). Having consistent relationships with adults committed to providing options, opportunities, skills, and confidence in young people is especially challenging for underrepresented students with a history of trauma (Del Quest et al., 2012). This study's findings were consistent with this study and other studies that stress the importance of supportive and healing relationships with adults and peers (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2016; Riggs et al., 2009; Storer et al., 2014). From a

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neurobiological standpoint, Perry (2006, 2009) asserted that social health was essential for adolescents' trauma recovery. This study's findings were consistent with Perry's findings regarding strong and supportive ties as a predictor for trauma recovery. While participants in this study still have lasting trauma effects, all participants indicated that social ties with peers and faculty or trusted adults were essential in their trauma recovery during their postsecondary education.

Additionally, most participants indicated that social connectedness continues to be a protective factor for them currently as they navigate their postsecondary education programs. College administrators and education stakeholders could further assist students by facilitating connections with peers, faculty, staff personnel, and the community. These intentional connections could result in impactful connections with peers and allow trusted adult relationships.

ACE Questionnaire

Table 2: ACE Questionnaire Results

While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:	Count
(If yes, enter 1; if no, enter 0)	
1. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often or very often**… Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? **or** Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?	**5**
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often or very often**… Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? **or** Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?	**5**
3. Did an adult or person at least five years older than you **ever**… Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? **or** Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?	**6**
4. Did you **often or very often** feel that… No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? **or** Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?	**3**
5. Did you **often or very often** feel that … You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? **or** Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?	**0**
6. Were your parents **ever** separated or divorced?	**2**
7. Was your mother or stepmother: **Often or very often** pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? **or Sometimes, often, or very often** kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? **or** Ever repeatedly hit at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?	**1**
8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?	**3**
9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?	**6**
10. Did a household member go to prison?	**0**
Note: reference Table 2: ACE Questionnaire Results to Appendix B: Part II	

Data collected from the ACE questionnaire also served to capture broad adversity and identify the overall stressors of the participants' environments. It also served to inform a better understanding of certain mental health concerns students with a history of trauma experienced based on the type of adversity they experienced. Sixty percent of the respondents reported experiencing sexual assault and living in a household with a depressed or mentally ill member or member who attempted suicide. Fifty percent of the respondents also reported being verbally or physically abused.

Understanding the connection between adverse childhood experiences, social issues, and adult mental and physical health in this study also helped inform policy suggestions in the discussion section that may support awareness, healing, and recovery in higher education. As a result of this study's data, I encourage postsecondary institutions to utilize the ACE questionnaire as an onboarding screening assessment tool to obtain a snapshot of the extent of adverse childhood experiences among students to inform interventions. It can also be used to refine further the interventions for students already at the postsecondary level. The ACE findings serve as a complement to other tools being used to understand what is working for different student populations in postsecondary education. It can also be used to educate the campus community about students' trauma experiences and how the university can address that trauma. ACE findings can allow colleges and universities to describe better the populations they serve and their trauma histories and promote trauma-informed systems to build resiliency and mitigate ACEs' impact. Finally, finding from the ACE questionnaire can be used to inform public policy. By collecting ACE data across various student populations, postsecondary institutions can more effectively advocate for public policies to ensure that students receive high-quality, trauma-

informed services as early as possible, and in the most appropriate setting to support and ensure academic success and completion.

Posttraumatic Growth

This study addressed an underrepresentation of voices from students with trauma histories in postsecondary education literature and the literature gap related to the growth they experienced despite trauma. They shared their stories of surviving trauma and thriving regardless of the barriers they encountered along the way by people in their lives or systems. As Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, and Lafavor (2008) noted, viewing trauma through a strengths-based lens allows for the idea that all the outcomes an individual may experience as a result of trauma may not necessarily be negative. The participants in this study described how trauma shaped who they are as a person today and how their past trauma has made current challenges in their lives easier to face. Participants in this study did not merely survive their trauma; they prevailed over the trauma and used their experiences to learn and grow.

Administrators, college faculty, staff, and counselors could benefit from viewing trauma through a strengths-based lens. Accounting for the possibility that one may experience growth despite trauma does not negate the difficulty one may experience in recovering from trauma, and professionals working with students continue to consider the negative impact trauma may have on an individual's life. However, it is equally important for professionals to understand that trauma is not the end of the story. For example, Harwick et al. (2017) found that resilience, personal strength, advocacy, and self-determination were essential to individuals overcoming barriers they experienced in childhood. Continuing to find ways in which administrators, counselors, and higher education stakeholders can promote environments that assist students with trauma histories in tapping into their strength could provide essential systemic support for

postsecondary education students. Consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), participants in this study were able to draw from their strength, newfound appreciation of life, support and connection to others, and the meaning they made from their experiences to grow despite the trauma they experienced.

The individuals in this study did not experience this growth in isolation, which indicates the need for professionals working with students to listen to their experiences, support them in their journey, and believe they are capable of resilience and growth. Every participant in this study had someone who believed in them. Whether it was a family member, a faculty member, an adviser or counselor, a peer, or a mentor; they had someone who recognized their potential and saw their strengths regardless of the trauma they experienced. Every postsecondary professional should be ready to be "the one" for any number of students, which happens through empathy, openness, understanding, and acceptance.

Limitations

Though rigorous methodological and analytical procedures were utilized throughout the conception and completion of this study, it had some imitations. In this section, I will present each of the limitations of this study. This study's limitations include limitations of participant demographics, utilizing interviews as a data collection method, and the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Participant Demographics

All the participants who participated in this study were from a mid-size four-year university. While the results reflect participants from various student populations, having a more diverse sample in gender would have been ideal. Of all 10 participants, only one identified as male. Additionally, this sample of students in this study had a diverse representation of racial and

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ethnic variation. However, there was an overrepresentation of females, and nearly half of the participants were Hispanic or Latina.

Interviews

I anticipated having difficulty arranging multiple interviews with this population. First, the study's nature is sensitive and requires some level of trust or rapport with the interviewer to disclose traumatic experiences. Secondly, students in college typically must balance work and school, and busy schedules, resulting in limited free time (Clark, 2009). A focus group would have been beneficial for giving participants a space to relate their experiences with one another; however, this was not practical for this study.

COVID Pandemic

As noted in Chapter 3, I anticipated having at least 16 participants for this study. However, due to the COVID-19 social distancing protocol, the university campus where this study was conducted, and other public venues were shut down. The social distancing protocol impacted this study's recruitment efforts as I could not recruit from the campus spaces where students would typically convene. Because of this, a limited sample size than intended was recruited.

Future Research

Many programs exist to serve as recruiting strategies for universities to obtain a more diverse student body. In this study, pre-college programs such as TRIO Education Talent Search (ETS) were mentioned as being influential on a student's decision to study enroll in postsecondary education. However, a more in-depth evaluation of these programs could yield information on how these programs promote students' success among students with a history of trauma. Exploring how many students participate in such programming and how many enroll in

college can alert scholars to such programs' influence on getting students to enroll in college. If higher education researchers want to gain a greater understanding of student retention and persistence, more information about the pre-college journeys of students with a history of trauma is needed. Additionally, pre-college programs have the power to inspire. Researchers can ask how pre-college programs inspire students to persist, especially in institutions where they are a small minority and face many obstacles to achieving success.

A lack of trauma-informed teaching methods might diminish the student experience in college classrooms. Researchers should study what effects of trauma-informed content delivery (pedagogy) inside the classroom has on student persistence. Do students from these backgrounds feel isolated and reluctant to persist because of the classroom's lack of trauma-informed instruction? Future studies on how a student with a history of trauma should be taught and what pedagogical effect styles have on their persistence and retention. Through an increased understanding of the interactions between professors and students inside the classroom, higher education researchers can open a new window into students' journey with a history of trauma. If a student feels invalidated, humiliated, offended, or isolated in classwork, how can higher education faculty and administrators expect them to stay in college? Future research on trauma-informed pedagogical approaches can help current professors and researchers create classroom environments that allow students to feel valued and succeed.

Additionally, universities have additional funding sources available for creating success among students with a history of trauma. What role do specific funding sources (federal funding and government and private grants) play in these students' persistence in colleges and universities? Future research addressing these questions would provide researchers with a greater understanding of how these student's experiences differ at other institutions.

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This study did not provide data to indicate administrations' background in trauma-informed practice through leadership training, experience, or education. Future research could be conducted to expand Minton and Pease-Carter (2011) work that found counselor education programs do not fully prepare future counselors for the crises they will encounter in the field. Similarly, Courtois and Gold (2009) found that a disparity exists in the counseling profession to address psychological trauma in the field. College administration and counselor preparedness to recognize and understand trauma symptoms and adequate training to support these students are not represented in the current literature. Counselor literature indicates that counselors will become increasingly expected to identify and work with students with a history of trauma (Martin, et al., 2017). With an increase in focus on trauma-informed training for educators, it is essential to understand the extent to which administration can recognize and prepare to create trauma-informed college systems (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

More qualitative inquiry needs to be conducted to hear the voice of this student population. While generalizing research results is essential in higher education, qualitative inquiry provides an understanding of college persistence issues for various student populations. Retention and persistence should not only be viewed as an issue best understood through spreadsheets and percentages of student GPAs or test scores but also through the understanding of the lived experiences that are best examined through qualitative research. Qualitative methods such as one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews help provide a foundation of dialogue and discussion, which is vital in developing ways to increase students' achievement with a history of trauma who decide to go to college.

Conclusion

  This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of postsecondary students with a history of trauma as it relates to their enrollment and persistence in postsecondary education. It provided a rich and thick description of 10 students with histories of trauma, their experience before and during postsecondary education, and growth despite the trauma. The four central themes and fourteen secondary/subthemes that emerged from this study were related to the following: participants' experiences before entering college; emotional experiences and reactions participants encountered throughout the journey; the impact that trauma and experiences had on their academic success; the impactful connections participants made in their journey in postsecondary education; factors that impacted motivation to pursue and complete a postsecondary education; and participant's experiences with posttraumatic growth.

  The population of students with a history of trauma enrolling in higher education has grown exponentially. They continue to be faced with many barriers to achieving success in college. However, the higher education community must be careful not to overlook these students' positive experiences like those portrayed in this investigation. Examining positive influences on student persistence and the experiences that promote growth can inform practitioners, administrators, and policymakers just as much as examining the factors that deter student achievement. Higher education personnel must continue to examine the persistence of these students once they reach the college campus. It is through continued growth in understanding and awareness that actual change is possible. The higher education community can benefit significantly from becoming more trauma-informed, inclusive, and more successful in graduating (Vasquez, 2007).

In his essay, *Dean-Based Leadership* (2006), Mark W. Clark pointed to the need for more qualitative data when making decisions about diversity in higher education. Clark argued that student experiences (qualitative data) are secondary to quantitative data on students of color. Clark further argues that because of the diverse experiences of students of color in college, the quality of their experiences and the understanding of their journey is a more meaningful indicator of success that just numbers and enrollment data (Clark, 2006). It is vital that, like this study, researchers continue to document the complex academic and social experiences of students with a history of trauma. Suppose higher education institutions sought to increase the academic success of students in colleges and universities. In that case, they must focus not only on the numbers of students but also on different student populations' experiences with different academic conditions. College is a collaborative and personal process, and many factors determine a student's development while in college. A human element is added to data collection when higher education administrators hear and appreciate all student voices. Higher education personnel can learn from the students' journeys and understand what factors allowed them to persist and succeed. More, this research showed elements of PTG and that students with a history of trauma can succeed in a somewhat oppressive environment, but that students remain vulnerable to barriers that may hinder their academic success. Suppose higher education institutions expect to see increases in retention and persistence. In that case, they must change how they create validating, and supportive college environments for students with prior trauma histories can thrive. It is the institutions' responsibility to positively shape their experiences and support these students to graduation (Vasquez, 2007).

Limitations and areas for future research have been considered and discussed in this dissertation. This study presents commonalities within the discussion of the themes and

implications for higher administration and postsecondary stakeholders. The research provides an

insight into the struggles and challenges of the participants. It offers an opportunity to examine

how their experience can be recognized, understood, and applied to inform postsecondary

education retention and persistence initiatives.

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APPENDIX A

Part 1: Preliminary Survey Consent Form

Greetings!

The purpose of this research project is to examine how students with a history of trauma experience college and how their college experiences shape their overall perceptions of student success. This survey will take approximately 2-3 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary.

Your responses will be confidential. All data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. The survey questions will be about traumatic events that may have occurred in your lifetime. The only anticipated risk to participants is that you may experience some discomfort or strong emotions when recalling your experiences. A list of local resources will be provided to you at this end of this survey if this survey causes you any discomfort, or if you would like to talk to someone further about your experience. The results from this survey will be used for scholarly purposes only. Your participation may benefit the education field and trauma care professionals.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Alma Jam at jamaima@isu.edu. This research has been reviewed according to Idaho State University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "Yes" button below indicates that:

• **you have read the consent form**
• **you voluntarily agree to participate**
• **you are at least 18 years of age**

- o **YES**
- o **NO**

Part II. Life Events Checklist (LEC)

Listed below are a number of difficult or stressful things that sometimes happen to people. For each event check one or more of the boxes to the right to indicate that: (a) it happened to you personally, (b) you witnessed it happen to someone else, (c) you learned about it happening to someone close to you, (d) you're not sure if it fits, or (e) it doesn't apply to you. Be sure to consider your entire life (growing up as well as adulthood) as you go through the list of events.

Event	Happened to me	Witnessed it	Learned about it	Not sure	Doesn't apply
1. Natural disaster (for example, flood, hurricane, tornado, earthquake)					
2. Fire or explosion					
3. Transportation accident (for example, car accident, boat accident, train wreck, plane crash)					
4. Serious accident at work, home, or during recreational activity					
5. Exposure to toxic substance (for example, dangerous chemicals, radiation)					
6. Physical assault (for example, being attacked, hit, slapped, kicked, beaten up)					
7. Assault with a weapon (for example, being shot, stabbed, threatened with a knife, gun, bomb)					
8. Sexual assault (rape, attempted rape, made to perform any type of sexual act through force or threat of harm)					
9. Other unwanted or uncomfortable sexual Experience					
10. Combat or exposure to a warzone (in the military or as a civilian)					

11. Captivity (for example, being kidnapped, abducted, held hostage, prisoner of war)					
12. Life-threatening illness or injury					
13. Severe human suffering					
14. Sudden, violent death (for example, homicide, suicide)					
15. Sudden, unexpected death of someone close to you					
16. Serious injury, harm, or death you caused to someone else					
17. Any other stressful event or Experience					

Blake, Weathers, Nagy, Kaloupek, Charney, & Keane, 1995

Part III. Demographic for Survey

Directions: Please indicate your response by filling in the appropriate oval next to the correct response.

Gender
   o   Woman
   o   Man
   o   Non-binary or something else: _____

What is the best way to describe your pre-college environment (check all that apply)?
   o   Rural
   o   Urban
   o   Suburban
   o   Other: please specify _____

Would you describe your family as?
   o Low Income
   o Lower-Middle Income
   o Middle Income
   o Upper-Middle Income
   o Higher Income
   o I prefer not to answer

Marital Status
   o Never married
   o Married
   o Divorced
   o Separated
   o Widowed

Student Classification
   o First-year
   o Second-year
   o Third year
   o Fourth year
   o Five or more years

College Classification
   o Undergraduate student
   o Graduate student
   o Non-degree seeking

Did you begin college here or did you transfer here from another institution?
   o Started here
   o Transferred from another institution

Part 1: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY

Project Title: *Exploring Retention of Trauma-Exposed Students in Higher Education*
An Exploratory Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Alma Jam and Supervision
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: jamaima@isu.edu

Research Advisor: Rick Wagoner, PhD
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: wagorich@isu.edu

The purpose of this study is to broaden the scope of knowledge on how trauma is understood in higher education by examining how students with a history of trauma experience college and how their college experiences shape their overall perceptions of student success. Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes in length. No more than 1 hour of your time will need to be spent on the entirety of your research participation.

The only anticipated risk to participants is that you may experience some discomfort or strong emotions when recalling your experiences of being a student with a history of trauma as it pertains to your college education. I will provide you with a list of local resources available to you if this interview causes you any discomfort, or if you would like to talk to someone further about your experience. You could benefit from participating by learning more about yourself, and your experiences as a student. Your participation may benefit the education field, trauma care professionals (such as caseworkers or practitioners in the field of counseling and counselor education).

All possible efforts will be made to keep your identity and the information you share confidential. Your name will not be included in report of the data, as you will choose a pseudonym to be used instead. The individual interview will be audio recorded for transcription purposes using a digital recorder. Your recorded answers will not be identified with your name and will be erased after data analysis. The names of participants will not appear in any professional report of this research and any information from the interviews such as workplace or hometown/state will not be included. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the office of the principal investigator or the research advisor. The only potential exception to confidentiality is if you disclose to me a behavior or action that leads me to believe you may be in imminent danger to yourself or someone else. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you begin participation, you may withdraw at any time. Your decision will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having

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had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the IRB at Idaho State University.

Part II. ACE Questionnaire

Finding Your ACE Score: The ACE questionnaire is a simple scoring system that attributes one point for each category of adverse childhood experience. The 10 questions below each cover a different domain of trauma and refer to experiences that occurred prior to the age of 18. Higher scores indicate increased exposure to trauma, which have been associated with a greater risk of negative consequences.
While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often or very often**… Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? **or** Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often or very often**… Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? **or** Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
3. Did an adult or person at least five years older than you **ever**… Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? **or** Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
4. Did you **often or very often** feel that… No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? **or** Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
5. Did you **often or very often** feel that … You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? **or** Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
6. Were your parents **ever** separated or divorced?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____

7. Was your mother or stepmother: **Often or very often** pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? **or Sometimes, often, or very often** kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? <u>**or**</u> Ever repeatedly hit at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
10. Did a household member go to prison?	YES	NO	If yes, enter 1 _____
Now add up your "Yes" answers: _____ . This is your ACE Score.			

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Part I: Introductions
1. Share background and purpose of study
2. Give participant information about the process
3. Ask participants to review and or ask any questions
4. Offer a copy of the consent form and confirm permission to record
5. Establish a pseudonym

Part II: Pre-interview relationship building
1. How do you like [institution name]?
2. What do you enjoy about what you are studying?
3. What are some of your goals after you finish your program or graduate?

Part III: Interview
I am looking forward to talking to you and hearing your thoughts and experiences about how things went for you in your journey to postsecondary education. As you know, the focus of this study is on how students with a reported history of trauma experience success in college. Sharing about your educational history as a student with a history of trauma exposure could be difficult to talk about. As a reminder, you do not need to share anything with me that you feel would be distressing to your wellbeing, and you can focus your responses on your college experiences; in other words, you do not need to recount prior experiences that may be traumatic. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and I will move onto the next question. I encourage you to honor your own emotions and boundaries, and feel free to stop the interview at any time.

Prompt 1: Think about your prior educational experiences and take some time to reflect.
- What experiences stand out to you?
- What about these experiences makes them stand out to you?
- What it is about these experiences makes them impactful to you?
- What do you wish people better understood about your experience?

Prompt 2: You indicated that you have experienced traumatic events prior to college to participate in this study. Tell me about what it is like for you to have experienced trauma in your journey to postsecondary education?
- What does having a history of trauma mean to you, and is this something that is salient in relation to your college experiences?
- How did you navigate having a trauma history in college?
- How or were you able to access any support services (e.g. counseling)?
- How have these experiences impacted your growth, development, and persistence in college?

- What thoughts or feelings stood out for you when you were telling me about your experiences?

Prompt 3: Given all that you've been through, it's incredible to see how far you have come and what you have been able to accomplish (completing high school and being enrolled in a postsecondary education). What would you say differentiates you from your college peers?
- What contributed to your educational success?
- Who contributed to your educational success?

Prompt 4: What else would you like to share that we have not talked about related to your journey to postsecondary education?
- Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you think I should have?

Part IV: Conclusion
    A. I will express appreciation for their time and willingness to share their story with me at the end of the interview.
    B. Distribute information about how to access resources, including contacts for local crisis services such as domestic violence and sexual assault services, disability advocacy services, and counseling services and explain each briefly.

APPENDIX D

Resource List

Counseling Services	
Name of Organization	**Contact Information**
ISU Counseling Department	208-282-3156
Family Services Alliance	208-232-0742
Mental Wellness Centers	208-478-9081
Adult Mental Health	208-234-7900
A–Z Family Services	208-478-9822
Human Development Center	208-234-7900
Community Resource Directory **https://www.pocatello.us/447/Community-Resource-Directory**	

Institutional Review Board Approval

IRB-FY2020-263 - Initial: Letter of Approval (Expedited Review of Response)   Inbox ×

baerralp@isu.edu   Wed, May 20, 11:23 AM
to me, wagorich

May 20, 2020

Alma Jam
Educ Leadership
MS 8059

RE: Study Number IRB-FY2020-263 : Exploring Retention of Trauma-Exposed Students in Higher Education An Exploratory Phenomenological Study

Dear Ms. Jam:

Thank you for your responses to a previous review of the study listed above. These responses are eligible for expedited review under OHRP (DHHS) and FDA guidelines. This is to confirm that I have approved your application.

Notify the HSC of any adverse events. Serious, unexpected adverse events must be reported in writing within 10 business days.

You may conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The study is subject to renewal on or before May 20, 2021, unless closed before that date.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. Contact Tom Bailey (208-282-2179; email humsubj@isu.edu) if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Ralph Baergen, PhD, MPH, CIP
Human Subjects Chair

Participant Interview Invitation Letter

Idaho State University

June 2020

Dear (Participant),

Thank you so much for participating in the preliminary survey for the Exploring Retention of Trauma-Exposed Students in Higher Education research study. Your responses qualify you as a strong candidate for this study. Regarding this, I would be honored and grateful to have your participation and input in this study with a goal to inform administration on how to better support students with similar backgrounds and experiences as yours at Idaho State University.

Steps to ensure your participation:
1. Please review the consent form attached in PDF format below.

2. Please schedule an interview with me here. Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes in length. No more than 1 hour of your time will need to be spent on the entirety of your research participation.

3. Please complete the ACE Questionnaire at your convenience. The ACE questionnaire is a brief 10-item questionnaire intended in this study to prime participants to think about their adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) before the interview to (1) help participants to determine their understanding of and willingness to reflect on ACEs during the interview and (2) reflect on the list of factors or resources that may have helped them persist in college despite their history of trauma. Responses from the ACE questionnaire will be anonymous, meaning that the researcher cannot trace the data to an individual participant. To access, please click here.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me at jamaima@isu.edu. This research has been reviewed according to the Idaho State University Human Subjects Committee (IRB) procedures for research involving human subjects.

Again, thank you for your time and willingness to participate! I look forward to speaking with you!

Sincerely,

Alma

Contact: jamaima@isu.edu | (208) 241-0980

ROAR

Study Flyer

Exploring Retention of Trauma-Exposed Students in Higher Education

Seeking participants for a research study exploring the experiences of undergraduate students with a history of trauma and the impact it had on their college education experience.

Criteria for participation:
- 18 years of age or older
- Enrolled or planning to enroll at ISU
- Have completed 3 or more years of undergraduate course-work
- Identify as someone with a history of trauma

Please contact Alma Jam at jamaima@isu.edu if you have any questions. This research has been reviewed according to the ISU Human Subjects Committee (IRB) procedures for research involving human subjects.

Participants Needed

If interested, please complete a short 2-3 minute Preliminary Survey that can be accessed through the link or QR code. Thank you in advance for your assistance in furthering the knowledge base of trauma-informed care in higher education!

Idaho State University

ROAR

Code Sheet

Primary Theme 1: Identity
Identity refers to the individual factors that influenced the decision of participants to pursue postsecondary education. For most of the participants, these factors were influenced by family circumstance, value of education and aspiration to help others.   *Secondary themes:*
Motivators: participants were motivated to purse postsecondary education so they can have more opportunities and a better life/future.   *Cultural Differences & Language*: participants referred to various instances where their identity (e.g. ethnicity, cultural background or language) set them apart negatively which validated the need to pursue postsecondary education. Participants also discussed feeling a loss of [or change in] identity. This included cultural identity.
Primary Theme 2: Experiencing Trauma
This theme refers to the circumstances and experiences of the participants before arriving college. Participants described traumatic experiences they encountered before enrolling in postsecondary education. Note: this theme includes emotional impact as this secondary theme refers specifically to the impact the trauma had on them.   *Secondary themes:*

Trauma Experiences: participants referred to various types of traumatic experiences they encountered before and sometimes during postsecondary education.
           Surviving and Coping with Trauma: participants referred to the positive and negative methods of coping they utilized in postsecondary education.
           Understanding Trauma: participants referred to times in their postsecondary journey where they began to understand how to manage symptoms of trauma like anxiety and PTSD.

Primary Theme 3: Navigating Academic Success
This theme refers to the participant's experiences in various college environments and college personnel and peers they encountered during their time postsecondary education. Note: many participants experienced a variety of school settings and climates.   *Secondary themes:*

College Readiness: participants often described "feeling lost" and underprepared as they entered postsecondary education. *This secondary theme includes mental, emotional and financial readiness.*
           Academic Impact: This secondary theme is in reference to the participants' experiences with academics. There were varying degrees to which these experiences were positive or negative.
           Trauma Informed Education & Spaces: Various experiences with college environments were discussed (e.g. classroom, social setting, administrative offices, support service departments or organizations and off-campus community spaces). Some participants noted gaps in academic curriculum and or training impacted their academic success.

	Impactful Connections: Several participants described college personnel and peers who assisted in them being in a safe, connected, and accessible environment that promoted building healthy relationships (e.g. creating individualized learning environments, taking time to listen to students wishes).
Primary Theme 4: Experiencing Posttraumatic Growth	
Post-traumatic growth theory centers on the idea that growth can occur as a result of trauma, and ultimately can have a significantly positive impact on an individual's life. It is strengths-based and focuses on the idea that individuals who have experienced trauma have the ability to recover and grow, under the right conditions. *Secondary themes:*	
	Personal Strength/Resilience: Trauma survivors may experience an increased sense of personal strength, of one's capacities to survive and prevail after the trauma. This characteristic is often referred to in literature as "resilience." Post-traumatic growth refers to a growth process by which survivors of trauma are personally transformed as a result of the trauma, and these positive changes go far beyond coping with adversity, thus drawing on their personal strength. ***Connection, Understanding & Advocacy***: This is the idea that trauma-survivors may feel a greater connection to people in general. The individual may have an increased sense of compassion or empathy towards other people who have experienced trauma or suffering. This trait is also associated with a greater degree and frequency of performing altruistic acts for others. For example, having a sense of responsibility to give back to others in their situation or advocate for them in their struggle. Individuals also experience a greater sense of intimacy, closeness, and freedom to be oneself in the aftermath of a traumatic event. ***Making Meaning out of Trauma***: this secondary theme is described as a response to trauma as the individual's ability to develop new interests, partake in new activities, and embark on new adventures or a new life trajectory or arrive at some understanding of knowledge. People who experience this type of growth may embark on a career that is related to their trauma. ***Learning and Discovering:*** Trauma survivors may experience more existential questions about life's purpose and the need to make sense of life after the traumatic experience(s) than before. Individuals often experience a greater sense, or more focused, approach to life. The meaning one places on spirituality is unique to the individual, but in the context of post-traumatic growth, often includes the need to make sense of one's life and purpose post-trauma ***Self-Love & Appreciation of life***: Individuals experiencing post-traumatic growth often describe having a changed sense of what is important in life. They have a change in priorities, and what was once viewed as small or trivial, could be of great value and importance after the trauma. For example, the uncertain nature of life and death may become more intimate and meaningful to an individual.

Diagram of Themes

Experiencing Trauma

Surviving/ coping with trauma

isolation

fear of speaking out

Trauma Identity

normalizing trauma

Substance abuse

Understanding Trauma

Trauma Experiences

Feelings

Gender Oppression

Rape in the military
–cultural
–military

Childhood Trauma

- poverty
- homelessness
-domestic violence
-sexual assault
-suicide

Family Health Issues

-death of loved one
-suicide

domestic violence

Mistreatment invalidation

–being folkenized