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Lindsey Jaber

University of Windsor, lindsey.jaber@uwindsor.ca

Kimberly Hillier

University of Windsor, kimberly.hillier@uwindsor.ca

Salsabel Almanssori

University of Windsor, salsabel.almanssori@uwindsor.ca

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A Narrative Inquiry of Hyper-Productivity as a Trauma Response Among Academic Women

The rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among women in Canada indicates the need for ongoing systematic research on women's experiences with trauma. Among the effects of trauma, hyper-productivity is an undertheorized coping mechanism among women survivors, particularly within the context of academia where hyper-productivity is normalized. For the purposes of this study, traumatic events include "Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person"¹.

This qualitative pilot study investigated theoretical discussions around the gendered nature of academia, women's trauma, and women's mental health. The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) to explore and examine the experiences of women survivors of trauma within the context of academia; (2) to examine the gendered nature of academia, trauma, and mental health; and (3) to contribute to the epidemiological literature on women and trauma. Through narrative storytelling, the participants' experiences contribute to the advancement of women in society and overall equity, diversity, decolonization, and inclusion initiatives within higher education.

In the present study, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who identified as women. Participants were recruited from various campuses in Ontario and included women who were graduate students, academic faculty at various stages in their careers, and emeritus faculty. A purposive sampling strategy was employed so diverse experiences could be voiced and thematically analyzed during interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and were approximately 45 minutes in length. Diversity in their demographic and academic backgrounds offered a deeper level of complexity to the experiences shared within the interviews. At the forefront of our inquiry was a feminist methodological lens that maintained women's mental health and well-being at the categorical centre of inquiry.

Our findings indicate a bidirectional relationship between the two central themes of hyper-productivity and working through trauma. Within the central theme of hyper-productivity, sub-themes included: (1) challenges with the work-life interface; (2) influences on attachment styles; (3) ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic; (4) identities that are deeply rooted in accomplishments; (5) and an overall lack of resources to assist with the challenges inherent within these experiences. Working through trauma introduced the following sub-themes: (1) the presence of both adaptive and maladaptive reintegration and self-regulation strategies; (2) difficulties setting work-related boundaries; (3) fears of vulnerability, shame, and guilt; (4) post-traumatic growth; (5) the integral role of support; and (6) burnout. Results from studies such as ours highlight the importance of bringing to light various identifiers of trauma, empowering women to notice and take an active role in their workplaces with respect to understanding how structural inequities work, providing them with empowerment through learning, and building institutional capacity to support women survivors of trauma at all levels within academia.

¹American Psychological Association. (2021). *Facts about women and trauma*. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://apa.org/advocacy/interpersonal-violence/women-trauma>