

EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND NONTRADITIONAL FEMALE ADULT LEARNERS: MOVING THE NEEDLE FORWARD: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT: This systematic review of the literature on emotional abuse and women's experiences in higher education explored current and foundational literature to gain a better understanding of how nontraditional female adult learners who previously experienced emotional abuse manage their journeys in higher education. No literature was found specifically focused on emotional abuse and how the nontraditional female adult learner who previously experienced emotional abuse manages her journey in higher education. Much literature exists from a multidisciplinary and historical perspective using various language to define different social contexts and forms of abuse. Understanding how emotional abuse is situated in the larger abuse literature was central to this study. An exhaustive systematic review with selected citations was conducted finding a gap specific to emotional abuse and women's experiences in higher education. Challenges exist today for any student in higher education, yet further qualitative research is needed to better understand the narratives of the nontraditional female adult learner who previously experienced emotional abuse. Dominant culture ideology informs both the concept of abuse and our understanding of the nontraditional female student in higher education.

Keywords: systematic review, emotional abuse, nontraditional female adult learner, higher education, intersectionality, positionality

Violence and abuse occur globally across contexts and time in all societies. Violence and victimization in any form is a widespread public health concern with negative and long-term health consequences (Breiding et al., 2014; Felitti, 2002; Felitti et al., 2019). Violent behavior and domestic violence are reportable crimes and against the law (Black et al., 2011). The development of what we know about emotional abuse in the literature today is considered from a historical and foundational perspective. It is important to understand the context in which abusive behavior occurs and the language that varies around different types of abuse. It is also critical to understand the many nuanced ways violence in society is perpetuated especially as we consider the intersection of the nontraditional female adult learner (NFAL) who previously experienced emotional abuse (WPEEA) and how this student manages her journey in higher education.

To better understand the NFAL-WPEEA, we go back several decades and draw from a large body of work both within the United States and from a global perspective. The literature on emotional abuse emerged around childhood abuse and domestic violence. We also must consider the combination and implications of two co-occurring trends and their intersectionality in higher education in which a high prevalence of abuse in the general population is known (Jennings et al., 2017; Kelly, 2004; Rhatigan et al., 2005), along with data that shows more female nontraditional students are in college (Robertson, 2020). Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2018) indicates a steady increase in numbers and percentages of female students and students 35 and older over the last 50 years (Robertson, 2020). This suggests that the probability of a female adult learner who has experienced abuse in some form, or across relational, work, or academic contexts is high.

Loring (1994) wrote that emotional abuse is a form of psychological abuse in which the effects are difficult to detect. In the literature, emotional abuse is often part of a continuum of abuse in which a woman might experience physical, sexual, or verbal abuse for example, and/or be a victim of childhood abuse, neglect, or maltreatment (Loring, 1994). Emotional abuse in the literature is often associated with other forms of abuse or violence such as childhood (O'Hagan, 1995; Rees, 2010), childhood maltreatment (Hall et al., 2009), courtship violence (Makepeace, 1981), dating violence (Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Gover et al., 2008; Iconis, 2013; Jennings et al., 2017), domestic violence (Graham-Bermann & Hughes, 1999), intimate violence (Porter & Williams, 2011), intimate partner violence (Black et al., 2011; Breiding et al., 2014; Doyle, 2020; Jennings et al., 2017; Porter & Williams, 2011), marital violence (Straus, 1980), partner violence (Coker et al., 2000; Rhatigan, 2005), physical (Doyle, 2020;), psychological (Doyle, 2020; Follingstad, 2011; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Gormley & Lopez, 2010; Kelly, 2004), sexual violence (Oswalt et al., 2018), and in its broadest form abuse and abusive relationships (Loos & Alexander, 1997; Min, 2018; Northway et al., 2013).

Yet, emotional abuse can occur and be experienced without other forms of abuse (Loring, 1994). A rich body of multi-disciplinary literature exists on childhood, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, along with domestic violence, intimate partner violence and other forms of violent behavior including harassment, lateral violence, and workplace bullying; however, it is difficult to find current literature on emotional abuse separate from other forms of abuse. It is even more difficult to find current literature on emotional abuse and the NFAL and her experience as a student in higher education.

This integrative literature review was organized and structured conceptually and thematically (Torraco, 2016). As topics both abuse and nontraditional female students as adult learners in higher education (Mezirow, 2002) are “mature and well-developed topics” (Torraco, 2016, p. 414); however, emotional abuse and the NFAL-WPEEA are not. Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry was to “review, critique, synthesize” and reconceptualize (Torraco, 2016, p. 412) 1) what we know about emotional abuse as it is situated in the abuse literature to date, 2) how this intersects with the NFAL, and 3) how this student manages her journey in higher education. The research question leading this review of the literature and for future study was how the NFAL-WPEEA manages her educational journey in higher education. Many questions emerged. For example, “What is her experience as an adult learner? What are the challenges or barriers for her as a student in higher education? How has she overcome, persevered, changed, or grown? How has higher education impacted her personal journey? And importantly, for the scope of this paper, to define what emotional abuse is since emotional abuse is often referred to as psychological abuse. To better understand how emotional abuse is situated in the abuse literature, we look at emotional abuse across disciplines and time, as well as the statistics, demographics, and needs of the NFAL from a multicultural and systemic perspective, considering their stories as we move the needle forward. Finally, with relevance to the field of adult education, we ask, “How does the experience of emotional abuse intersect with learning for the nontraditional female adult learner and impact her journey in higher education?”

Nontraditional Female Adult Learners

Over the last several decades in the adult education literature and from a social constructionist viewpoint, work began to emerge cross-culturally around marginalization, victimization, and bullying with adult learners in the workplace, in higher education, and in relational settings (Sheared et al., 2010). Alongside the abuse literature and in the field of adult education, significant work emerged as well in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s around feminism and women's studies. Twenty years ago, as an emerging theme regarding women as nontraditional learners, Hayes and Flannery (2000) found "a dearth of literature, and what does exist frequently offers very limited insights" (2000, p. 19). They added, "Much of the literature fails to go deeply into what women as women are saying about their learning" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 19). Adult women learners as nontraditional students whether returning to college or first-time attendees encompass a statistically significant and growing number of students on college campuses (Brown & Brown, 2014; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).

Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory took "center stage in research and writing about adult learning" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 101) when he introduced disorienting dilemmas, transformational growth, and believed the goal of adult education was to help adults reach their potential (Mezirow, 2002). In 1999, Ntiri studied older college students as tutors for adult learners in an urban literacy program and found that sensitivity for an adult learner was important to their success. Darkenwald and Novak (1997) wrote that 45% of the students on college campuses were aged 25 years and older and that a significant percentage of the students were women. In a study by Brown and Brown (2014) using Mezirow's transformative learning theory and nontraditional female students returning to school, they found that women represent most students who return to school in midlife. Statistically, more nontraditional female students return to college (Brown & Brown, 2014; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Robertson (2020) published a 50-year look at adult student participation in the United States in higher education. Robertson (2020) stated that according to the National Center for Education Statistics, patterns changed in the 1970s and 80s and that nationally the percentage of students 25 years or older went from 27.8% in 1970 to 38.3% in 1980 to 44.1% in 1990 and stayed above 40% meaning that approximately two of five students in American colleges and universities are adult students. In fall 2017, nearly one in ten students was 40 years or older (Ginder et al., 2018).

Historical Context of Abuse

Emotional abuse as a concept and type of abuse fits within a long and broad framework that is interdisciplinary in scope and begins with researchers interested in child abuse and neglect alongside dating and marital violence. Trauma, violence, and abuse encompass various perspectives in the literature from fields that include medicine, nursing, psychology, sociology, criminal justice, law, education, family studies, women's studies, social work, and counseling. The definition of abuse then depends on the context, slant, field, or discipline. For example, when looking at the abuse literature, we find variances in how one might explain the difference between psychological and emotional abuse.

O'Hagan (1995) wrote, "Child abuse literature often gives the impression that the authors regard the terms *emotional abuse* and *psychological abuse* as synonymous, or that the latter, psychological abuse, subsumes the former and many other types of abuse" (p. 449). O'Hagan (1995) in the previous statement cited Brassard et al., (1993), Burnett (1993); Garbarino et al., (1986) Garbarino and Vondra (1987); and Hart and Brassard (1987) as support of his thinking. Navarre et al. (1987) wrote, "The terms psychological abuse, emotional abuse, and mental cruelty have been used interchangeably, and without clear definition" (p. 45).

Around this time, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study began to emerge as a landmark research study conducted jointly by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, California from observations in the 1980s around obesity and links to child abuse (CDC, 2020; Felitti, 2002). Two waves of data collection from 1995 to 1997 with 17,421 adults answering questions comparing their current health status to eight categories of adverse childhood experiences make the ACE study one of the largest and most significant studies to date on child abuse (CDC, 2020; Felitti, 2002).

Emerging in the literature around dating and marital violence, James Makepeace published *Courtship Violence Among College Students* in 1981 in a journal titled *Family Relations*. This publication set the tone for a wave of research that would follow over the next decades in which the dating behavior of young college students came into focus for the first time. Makepeace's exploratory quantitative study was conducted "at a medium size midwestern state university in the spring of 1979" (1981, p. 97) with 202 primarily (81.3%) freshman and sophomore students enrolled in introductory sociology and family sociology as an initial approach to developing an instrument for measuring courtship violence. The students were given class time to complete a questionnaire anonymously that took about 20 minutes (Makepeace, 1981). Male students comprised 49% of the sample and female students 51% (Makepeace, 1981). Examples of types of violence included "threat, pushed, slapped, punched, struck with object, assault with weapon, choked, and other" (Makepeace, 1981, p. 98). Makepeace found, "It appears that violence is a common, albeit neglected, aspect of premarital heterosexual interaction. If our results are typical of college students in general, more than one student in five has had direct personal experience in courtship violence" (1981, p. 100). Makepeace stated, "Recent concern with family violence has focused on child abuse and wife battering, while other forms have been relatively neglected. A need to recognize and focus on violence that occurs during the dating and courtship period is suggested" (1981, p. 97).

Along with this, Murray Straus in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire wrote in a paper presented as part of a series of the Family Violence Research Program in 1980, "The family is the most violent institution, group, or setting that a typical citizen is likely to encounter" (p. 229). His research focused on what he called "the paradox of family violence and family stress" (Straus, 1980, p. 229). Richard Tolman, who was involved with the Domestic Abuse Project in Minneapolis, Minnesota, published an article in 1989 writing, "This study describes the initial development of a scale of measurement of psychological maltreatment of women by their

male partners” (p. 159). Tolman’s initial 58-item scale was administered at intake to 407 men and 207 women in a domestic violence program (Tolman, 1989). From there studies began to emerge primarily quantitative using assessment measures and scales such as Tolman’s to better understand the phenomenon of abuse focused mainly on physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Most of the earlier quantitative studies were conducted at mid to large four-year colleges and universities with primarily White, heterosexual 18 and 19-year-old freshman and sophomore undergraduate students who qualified to participate in the studies if they were currently in a dating relationship or had been in the past. The participants would answer questionnaires during class time for course credit, as part of their research grade, or as extra credit.

In 1977, about a decade before Tolman, Lenore Walker first defined battered woman syndrome, a precursor to *The Battered Woman* published in 1979 and her iconic “Cycle of Violence Theory (Walker, 1979; 1984). The topic of women, abuse, and emotional abuse began to surface in the 1970s followed by a flush of books in the 1980s and 1990s and spurred by a rise in educational and sociocultural influences, feminist thinking, and prominent female authors. Carol Gilligan (1977, 1982), Mary Field Belenky and colleagues (Belenky et al., 1986), Jean Baker Miller at the Stone Center, and Dana Crowley Jack were each writing about women. Lenore Terr wrote about childhood trauma and Bessel van der Kolk and Bruce Perry emerged as experts around childhood abuse, complex trauma, and neuroscience with implications for consequences throughout one’s lifetime.

It is important to understand a brief chronology of abuse literature for three reasons: 1) to situate emotional abuse within the abuse literature, 2) to consider the context in which the experience of abuse occurred, and 3) to explore through further study the research question of how the NFAL-WPEEA manages her journey in higher education. To understand how emotional abuse fits into the larger picture one must understand the larger picture. Using an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the lives of women are seen as interconnected in microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macro systemic ways. Women as adult learners live in relationship to self, others, and the world. Women’s lives do not exist in a vacuum and neither does the experience of emotional abuse, or any other form of violence.

Positionality

Reflecting on the work of Misawa in Sheared et al. (2010), if we consider the experience of emotional abuse as an “invisible sociocultural” (p. 196) aspect of positionality like sexual orientation for example, then a student may never disclose this experience in the classroom. Yet, even if not disclosed the experience of emotional abuse like other aspects of positionality hidden to view exist (Sheared et al., 2010). Misawa in Sheared et al. (2010) wrote, “It is not possible for educators in adult and continuing education to create safe environments or achieve social justice in practice without thinking about the hidden aspects of positionality” (p. 196). It is important to consider that an adult learner with a history of emotional abuse may have as Tennant (2012) referred to as a repressed self, which could potentially impact the student as a learner. In a recently published qualitative

study on adult daughters of abused women and the completion of postsecondary education, Anderson and Connors (2020) reported that few studies specifically explored the impact of childhood exposure to domestic violence on academic outcomes in postsecondary education. Their study focused on the impact and exposure of domestic violence as witnessed by the daughters of women who were victims of domestic violence with implications for their learning and perseverance toward academic success later in postsecondary education.

Min (2019) looked at risk factors of abusive relationships for nontraditional students using a study in which the data from 10,762 participants was compiled from the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment II (ACHA-NCHA II) survey. The dependent variable was categorized to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Min, 2019). Descriptive data included the average age of the nontraditional student as 32 years old in contrast to the average age of the traditional student as 21 years old (Min, 2019). The study found that the nontraditional student was 40% more likely to experience emotional abuse (Min, 2019). In conclusion, Min (2019) stated, “This study attempted to understand nontraditional students’ abusive relationships compared to traditional students, as an abusive relationship was one of the important public health issues among college students” (p. 6). Min (2019) wrote, “Current literature, however, did not provide us comprehensive understanding on this issue for nontraditional students” (p. 6). Therefore, across contexts and disciplines, it appears that even though emotional abuse was acknowledged as a problem decades ago it continues to be an underrepresented construct in the abuse literature as does the experience of the nontraditional female adult learner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following systematic review of the literature on emotional abuse and women’s experiences in higher education for the NFAL took me on my own researcher’s journey. I found much good foundational work on abuse over the decades that occurred alongside significant markers in history, politics, society, culture, and education. Solid contributions in adult education around the nontraditional student and women were also found. In moving the needle forward, future qualitative research can provide insight into a topic that has long been overlooked. Though significant strides have been made across disciplines and through feminist pedagogical work, women as nontraditional students in higher education with histories of emotional abuse, along with other marginalized populations will continue to emerge to shape, influence, and change how we see not only ourselves, but others.

As a researcher, I initially thought that I needed to isolate emotional abuse in the literature, yet through a reflexive process, I came to see how important it was to gain a deeper understanding of how emotional abuse fits conceptually and historically into the very rich and larger body of abuse literature. Emotional abuse is one piece of a very large systemic puzzle. Without at least a foundational knowledge of the broader social context in which emotional abuse resides within we would be amiss. Future research in adult education around emotional abuse and the NFAL in higher education has

multidisciplinary and global implications that impact sectors such as education, mental health, and medicine as well as in shaping policy, pedagogy, and decision-making.

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