ITALIAN DUAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE *CABRINI* MOVIE AS A LENS: A NEW TRAJECTORY IN ADULT LEARNING AROUND EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACT: In the Angel Studios 2024 movie *Cabrini* set in 1889, an Italian immigrant woman comes to America with a fierce passion for helping marginalized children. Charged with a seemingly impossible task, she perseveres through each obstacle. While watching the movie, I felt angry throughout at the injustices faced. Afterwards, I felt inspired by the truly amazing life's work of Mother Francesca Cabrini in this biopic. Her vision and transformative mark on the world created a new trajectory. Mother Cabrini stood up to misogyny, prejudice, rigid ideology, and harsh institutional policy meant to stop her, yet she kept going, persisted, never gave up hope, and realized her own power through voice when others tried to silence, cripple, and shut down the efforts of what she and others worked hard to accomplish. Our stories matter. Getting real in adult education is being safe enough to be who we are, where we are. Trauma-informed pedagogy allows a student to show up as they are in an educational environment of acceptance. Whether we are talking about my grandparents' immigration to America from Sicily, Italy in the early 1900's fleeing poverty for the perception of a better life and my connection to them now through dual citizenship, the *Cabrini* movie, or immigrant issues we face globally today, the actions one takes as a student, professor, or administrator make a difference. Advocating for victims of abuse of any form changes the trajectories of lives.

Keywords: adult learning, adult learner, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, institutional abuse, trauma-informed practice, trauma-informed pedagogy

It is time to tell the truth about what happened. It is way past time to speak authentically and clearly about what is still happening. It is also imperative to change the narrative and deconstruct the tyrannous hold that emotional, psychological, and institutional abuse has had on my life. This deeply personal story captures complex layers and decades of intergenerational hurt and trauma. This story, my story, speaks to what it means to be human. My narrative could be ubiquitous to your story. In Africa, a Zulu proverb states that the essence of being human is called *Ubuntu* (Clinton Foundation, 2012; Igboin, 2021; Ogude, 2019, 2019). Archbishop Desmond Tutu believed that we are people through other people. He stated that his humanity is tied to ours (Ogude, 2019, 2019). Truth-telling and *Ubuntu* principals intersect and relate with one another (Clinton Foundation, 2012). Ogude wrote that Ubuntu is rooted in a relational form of personhood, which means we are because of others. Ogude, interviewed by Steve Paulson and Anne Strainchamps in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia said that as human beings, our humanity and personhood is fostered in the relationship we have with other people. Therefore, Ubuntu philosophy maintains when one person hurts, we all suffer.

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According to Davidson (2017), telling the truth and getting real in adult education using a trauma-informed pedagogical approach means educators and administrators meet students where they are and model respect, compassion, and empathy. "Over the past 30 years, researchers have built a strong evidence base for trauma-informed approaches in medical and judicial fields" (p. 3). Davidson wrote, "Awareness of trauma and its wide-reaching negative impacts is also becoming more widespread in education, and educators are developing their own approaches to help break the cycle of trauma for students" (p. 3). McInerny and McKlindon (2014) stated that educators at all educational levels are becoming increasingly aware of recognizing and supporting trauma-affected students. They stated that educators are engaging students in academic learning, finding helpful resources, and creating safe spaces for students to succeed. Trauma-informed practice and pedagogy recognizes that what an adult learner brings into the physical or virtual classroom matters whether the student ever speaks their truth or not. Paramount to speaking one's truth and showing up authentically is safety. Without psychological safety, learning, self-growth, and self-actualization is impaired (Davidson).

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the theory of human motivation, basic physiological needs must be met foundationally before an individual can progress to a higher hierarchical need, with the second level being one of safety and security (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Safety and feeling safe is a basic human rights need as well with developmental, psychological, and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979) implications. We see bonding rituals across human and animal species for survival and protection. The ability to speak up about what we know, question our uncertainties and felt injustices, and express ourselves emotionally differentiates us from all other living creatures. When we as people are compromised through neglectful and abusive environments and toxic people and situations, this dilemma and level of dysfunction is not only raised as a personal lament, but also as a public health concern. How one makes sense out of what happens to each of us is an essential task in how we construct meaning in our lives and is neither inconsequential nor a small thing.

College campuses need to provide safe spaces for people to engage in difficult conversations. This is not just about seeking to construct a safe, conflict-free zone, but focused on generating a dialogue open to tension and disagreement, yet one in which each voice matters (Shrewsbury, 1987). Transparency in course design, clear expectations communicated, and managing sensitive discussions and conceptual changes from a student-focused approach are paramount in helping students succeed (Shrewsbury). Creating these spaces on campuses and in communities requires human capital and resources, as well as courage, energy, compassion, commitment, and time. In the absence of safety, mistrust and fear reside. Spaces that provide safety will mean different things to different people and across different cultures. Without repercussions, people need places they can go to decompress, de-stress, unwind, relax, recharge, and rest. We also need places and spaces that stimulate and promote intellect, culture, thought, creativity, and connection.

As adult educators and administrators, we serve in roles in which we are called to model humane ways of being and to serve as advocates for all students. Marginalized student populations bring various challenges into the learning environment. Students sharing their real struggles builds resilience (Lohr, 2018). When we take action, connect a student to a needed resource, or take the time to listen to a part of their story on a particularly stressful day, the trajectory of one's life may be altered positively. We may never know or fully realize the impact of a seemingly small act or the influence of one person throughout time. This is how I see the importance of each person's journey whether it is crossing an ocean or crossing a stage

to receive a diploma. I relate the movie *Cabrini* as a call to stand up against emotional, psychological, and institutional abuse as barriers that continue to exist today.

Language of Abuse and Definitions

Abuse: What We Know

The abuse literature is vast. After conducting a review of the literature encompassing the last fifty years on abuse and how emotional and psychological abuse fits into the larger abuse literature that includes child abuse and domestic and family violence over generations, I concluded that the language of abuse is better understood when recognizing how this body of literature has evolved depending on the time, field, and place in society. Questions from my review include how to define abuse? And more importantly, how to differentiate the various forms of abuse to gain clarity into a complex issue?

Emotional and Psychological Abuse

It is important to set the historical context of emotional abuse as a form of psychological abuse and to ground emotional abuse in the context of other types of abuse such as physical, sexual, and childhood abuse. Literature about trauma and abuse exists among many disciplines (Chang, 1996; Gelles & Straus, 1979; Hague, 1999; Hall et al., 2009; Resko, 2010; Vidourek, 2017; L. Walker, 1978; 1979; 1984; 2015; M. Walker, 1999; Zink et al., 2006). Abuse language in the literature changes depending on the context and perspective. For instance, trauma and abuse can be referred to as domestic violence (DV), intimate partner violence (IPV), bullying, battering, harassment, sexual harassment, dating violence, family violence, and physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal abuse. Over the past decades, much has been written about physical, sexual, and childhood abuse, along with trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), IPV (Hague, 1999; Resko, 2010), DV, lateral violence, bullying, perpetrators, victims, and batterers. Current literature across fields on emotional abuse either links emotional abuse with the prevalence of physical, sexual, and childhood abuse, as a precursor to other forms of violence, or as part of an escalation of types of abuse. Emotional abuse can be part of a continuum of abuse to include verbal, physical, or sexual abuse, but emotional abuse can also be experienced in adulthood without other forms of abuse (Loring, 1994).

In 1978 Lenore E. Walker developed the Battered Woman Syndrome Questionnaire (BWSQ) to assess the psychological effects of abuse as part of her domestic violence research. Walker (2015) updated the 1978 definition of battered woman syndrome and addressed the detrimental psychological effects of domestic violence as significant. Walker identified women as the primary victims and stated more research was needed. Emotional abuse is a form of psychological abuse and trauma that is underrepresented in the literature and often missed in practice settings (Gelles & Straus, 1979; Loring, 1994; L.Walker, 1979; Zink et al., 2006). Emotional abuse is just as destructive as other forms of abuse such as physical, sexual, or childhood, yet emotional abuse often is insidious in nature, embedded within the social construct of one's cultural context, is minimized, rationalized, denied, dismissed, and often goes unnoticed and undetected (L. Walker, 2015).

Gaslighting

The term "gaslighting" and emotional abuse have found their way into popular culture. Even ten years ago, emotional abuse and gaslighting were less understood or acknowledged as forms

of abuse. Sweet (2019) stated that gaslighting has captured the public's attention and is a "type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel "crazy," creating a "surreal" interpersonal environment" and that gaslighting is "rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships" (p. 851).

Institutional Abuse

For the context of this article, institutional abuse refers to such forms as microaggression, mobbing, bullying, workplace or lateral violence, incivility, or harassment (Namie, 2003; Namie & Namie, 2003; Olweus, 1978, 1993; Randall, 1997, 2001). This form of abuse occurs in employment and academic settings and occurs for students, athletes in training, and those in professional roles. This can include roles in which the victim of the abuse is in an unequal relationship such as a student with a teacher, professor, coach, or administrator. Positionality and privilege create power differentials to exist in many settings in the workforce and in academia. Anytime a person in a contextual role gains power that can impact a person's life, abuse of that power can occur. Examples include grading, scoring, gatekeeping, job or academic performance, reviews, athletic performance, evaluations, subjectivity in testing, retention, graduation, and in high-stakes professional, academic, and athletic advancement. Compassion can go alongside academic and workplace rigor without mitigating standards of practice.

Misawa (2009) cited Namie and Namie (2003), Olweus (1978, 1993), and Randall (1997, 2001) and wrote, "Scholars, researchers, and practitioners in social sciences have confirmed that bullying is an international phenomenon that exists in many settings including K-12 schooling during childhood and the workplace during adulthood" (p.1). Johnson-Bailey (2001, 2015) and Misawa & Johnson-Bailey (2024) wrote about the significant impact of incivility and aggressive bullying using examples that spanned over twenty years and involved faculty and students.

The effects of institutional abuse in higher education for faculty, staff, and students can cause emotional, psychological, spiritual, financial, and physiological repercussions and long-lasting consequences to the overall mental and physical health of an individual. Institutional abuse like emotional abuse is subtle. Yet, both forms of abuse are real and exist embedded within the very culture of which they reside, perpetuated by structural and hierarchical barriers.

Trauma-Informed Practice in Adult Learning

Trauma-informed educators recognize that students' actions are a direct result of their life experiences. When students act out or disengage, a trauma-informed professor will not ask, 'What is wrong with you?' but rather, 'What happened to you? (Huang et al., 2014). All students face challenges as they transition into college, but for a student with a history of trauma or abuse, normal college challenges can be more difficult. This section provides a brief summary of the overlapping implications of trauma, feminism, and intersectionality, along with the impact of trauma on adult learners and in the field of adult education.

Trauma

Trauma is defined as any experience in which a person's internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors (Hoch et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2024). Over the past thirty years, trauma research continues to indicate the effects of trauma from a cultural, societal, and global

perspective. In the United States, the landmark longitudinal study on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* in 1998 supports the effects of childhood trauma and abuse over time throughout one's life both physically and emotionally. As the number of traumatic childhood events increases, so does the risk for serious health problems in adulthood (Felitti, 2002). Adults who experienced trauma as children are: fifteen times more likely to attempt suicide; four times more likely to become an alcoholic; three times more likely to use antidepressant medication; and three times more likely to experience depression (Davidson, 2017). Bremness and Polzin (2014) stated that in recent years, some mental health professionals and policymakers have worked towards a new diagnosis of 'developmental trauma,' which describes individuals whose history of trauma causes persistent and pervasive emotional and physiological dysregulation. Postsecondary education implications have been linked to many difficulties a learner may face both in the present and over time.

Feminism

In considering the various ways in which abuse is represented in the literature, it is significant and relevant to better understand the historical and chronological perspective of feminist work that goes back to the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of second-wave feminism in America. The vast body of abuse literature grew simultaneously over the decades alongside the rise of feminism and feminist theory. Overall, across history and throughout time the rights of women have long been held in direct relationship to the dominant ideology in place politically, societally, and culturally within the context of women's lives. The rights of women today continue to be influenced by the power structures that exist in relational, work, and academic settings across every culture. Strides and historical gains made for women's rights also brought many challenges that continue to exist for women especially around the issue of abuse. What we currently know about abuse remains riddled with misinformation, stigma, silence, shame, and fear.

A very brief synopsis of the historical context and backdrop of nearly two hundred years of feminism in the United States helps to situate education and specifically adult learning within the body of literature around feminism and feminist theory. Feminism is defined as a "diverse body of theoretical work" and "a social and political movement" (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 638). Barker and Jane wrote, "Feminism aims to examine the position of women in society and to further their interests" (p. 638). In the United States, the voices of women politically around issues of equality dates to 1923 with the National Women's political party and suffragist Alice Paul (Barker & Jane). In the 1960s and 1970s, landmark political, legislative, and societal decisions around feminism and education were implemented. Title IX of the *Education Amendments of 1972* became law, the term "sexual harassment" was used in 1973, the *Women's Educational Equity Act* (WEEA) was enacted in 1974, and the first "Take Back the Night (TBTN)" march was held in October 1975 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Coe & Sandberg, 2019; Sandler, 2007; Valentin, 1997). TBTN marches occur globally to protest against gender violence toward women in spaces assumed to be safe (Coe & Sandberg, 2019). These events illustrate a few examples of the many that have taken place across the decades to raise awareness around the rights of women and the abuse of women.

Dialectics about women and education in the twenty-first century using a comparative education and feminist theory perspective provide us with insight into the ongoing challenges women face (Torres et al., 2022). In this edited book, we consider the many systemic and interconnected ways in which women's lives interface within the context of family,

community, and society, along with educational and individual goals and pursuits (Stromquist, 2022, Chapter 7). Oftentimes, across cultures, the overt or covert message regarding the education of girls and women may be different from what the individual wants. This may be due to patriarchal values, rules, norms, and beliefs. Education, philosophically speaking, is a liberating idea. Yet, for many women globally today, their personal and educational choices may be limited or restricted based on the culture in which they live within. Feminist pedagogy is egalitarian, community based, and aimed at changing conceptual frameworks (Shrewsbury, 1987). Feminist pedagogy respects situated knowledge and each person's experience and expertise, along with regard for multiculturalism and diverse experiences and cultures (Shrewsbury).

Significant achievements historically for women in general that rattled the status quo may have also meant that an individual woman experienced a heightened level of abuse in her place of work, in academia, and in interpersonal and intimate partner relationships. "Intimate partner violence against women is a global public health problem with many short-term and long-term effects on the physical and mental health of women and their children" (Sardinha et al., 2022, p. 803). In the United States, nearly half of all women experience psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime (McNeil, 2024; McLeod & Ozturk, 2024). Every day, globally, women may carry histories of abuse with them into academic classrooms and environments.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality emerged from the seminal work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 2013). Social and cultural explications arose from Crenshaw coining the word in a lawsuit. Crenshaw's work is frequently cited as the beginning of the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw's groundbreaking work emerged from black feminism and bridges intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry. Through Crenshaw's work in 1991, focusing on the experience of black females in academia and in society at large, the concept of intersectionality became more accepted in academia. Features of her work include that she "places herself within her narrative" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 82). Collins and Bilge wrote that "experience and embodied knowledge are valorized, as is the theme of responsibility and accountability that accompanies such knowledge" (p. 82). Another important feature of Crenshaw's work includes how in assessing the needs of women, and in analysis of their needs, one cannot simply look at only one aspect. Collins and Bilge wrote of her work, "Crenshaw's innovation lies in building her argument from the ground up from the experiences of women of color and then showing how multiple systems of power are inseparable in the ways they impact their lives" (p. 82). Two other features include a perspective in which social justice and "relationality" (p. 83), which focuses on the essential aspect of interconnectedness between people, and the importance of understanding the dynamics of the relationships in which, in this case, women intersect with others.

Feminist theory and intersectionality, as a framework, can be used as a critical lens in which oppressed and marginalized male and female adult student learner populations, in the United States and internationally, who share a history of abuse of any form, can join against inequity and social injustice in pursuing educational and personal goals. Creating inclusive learning environments in Adult Education with feminist theory as a foundation and acknowledging multicultural concerns helps provide important insight, awareness, and intentionality for educators (Tisdell, 1995).

Adult Education

We have much to learn from the rich work in the field of Adult Education of several noteworthy and influential researchers, including Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 2013); the work of Vanessa Sheared, Juanita Johnson-Bailey, and colleagues, as well as authors whose chapters appear within this important book such as Doris Flowers and Mitsunori Misawa in the first edition of *The Handbook of Race and Adult Education: A Resource for Dialogue on Racism* (2010). Others include Ronald M. Cervero and Arthur L. Wilson (2001) in *Power in Practice: Adult Education and the Struggle for Knowledge and Power in Society*; and Jack Mezirow (1978, 1997, 2000). Whether listed here or not, scholars each illuminate the intersections of power, privilege, and feminist theory within the fields of Adult Learning and Adult Education.

The Impact of Trauma

The effects of trauma can block a student's ability to learn. Visible indicators might include that a student has difficulty focusing or missing class. They may experience challenges with emotional regulation, display anger, or seem anxious about tests and deadlines. A student could seem withdrawn, demonstrate poor boundaries, or disclose current or past unhealthy relationships. This list is not exhaustive. Many effects of trauma for an adult learner are expressed as psychological manifestations suffered silently, passively, and invisibly. Examples could include witnessing a student's lack of confidence, negative self-talk, second-guessing, a poor sense of self, a lack of positive self-esteem, indecision, and trouble completing assignments, programs, and degrees.

Boyraz et al., (2013) stated that trauma-exposed African American female students are more likely to leave college before the end of their second year. Student groups at elevated risk include veterans, current and former foster youth, indigenous peoples, refugee students, LGBTQ+ students, and nontraditional adult learners (Davidson, 2017).

Subjectivity, Italian Dual Citizenship, and the *Cabrini* Movie

In the movie *Cabrini* set in 1889, an Italian immigrant woman comes to America with a fierce passion for helping marginalized children, victims of societal and familial neglect and abuse. Charged with a seemingly impossible task, she perseveres through each obstacle. Mother Cabrini faced many challenges and injustices. She experienced emotional, psychological, and institutional abuse, even if that specific language was not articulated or known at the time. The inspiration of Mother Cabrini's story is how she overcame and transformed not only her life, but the lives of many. It is through her vision and transformative mark on the world that a new trajectory was created. Mother Cabrini stood up to misogyny, prejudice, rigid ideology, and harsh institutional policy meant to stop her, yet she kept going, persisted, never gave up hope, and realized her own power through voice when others tried to silence, cripple, and shut down the efforts of what she and others worked hard to accomplish.

For me, the *Cabrini* movie was a true example of what an empowered sense of self looks like rising up through ashes of defeat. I know first-hand because I am a victim of emotional, psychological, and institutional abuse. The metaphor of ashes represents any student who has ever struggled. It represents the survivor of any form of abuse who stays enrolled despite what "they" (hierarchies and institutions) say, what they are told by others (that they will not succeed), and despite data, gatekeepers, or any other arbitrary reason as to why the thing one is there to do (graduate) may not be attained. For an adult learner with a history of emotional,

psychological, or any other form of abuse, physical and psychological safety are key to one's ability to learn, grow, succeed, and thrive. Transformative change is a process. Achievement is possible. Degrees in higher education are earned, yet the path to completion can be riddled with obstacle upon obstacle. Emotional, psychological, and institutional abuse are subtle, yet they exist. They are embedded within the culture and fabric of society. Mother Cabrini's legacy continues to inspire growth, leadership, and advocacy. She reminds each of us to remember or find what it is we know for sure, who we are, and what we stand for. She compels us to be authentic, kind, and true to our own beliefs. Her message challenges us to stand up for those less fortunate, for the young, the elderly, the mentally ill, and the marginalized person of any generation, population, or of any society whose needs are compromised by poverty, violence, or oppression.

Each of my paternal and maternal Sicilian Italian grandparents immigrated to the United States in the early 1900's. The *Cabrini* movie was set in 1889, which intersects a time in history when many immigrants came to America with the dream of a better life only to find injustice, prejudice, and impoverished ways of living. When we share aspects of our stories with others, whatever language we use, choose not to use, or do not even yet realize the words to use, we give people glimpses into who we are and what we have been through. Ancestral and intergenerational trauma and abuse exist and impact our lives in ways we cannot always clearly see. A better understanding around patterns and themes of abuse in families, in interpersonal relationships, and in institutions over time can help us gain insight, act, reconcile, heal, transform, and break free from the bondage of abuse. Seeking dual citizenship for me is both a legacy gift for my children and future generations, as well as a deeply personal and necessary connection and part of my own healing journey.

Future Implications

Future implications include recognizing college and campus-level strategies to mitigate the negative effects of trauma on an adult learner's educational trajectory. This means training faculty and staff in trauma-informed practices and pedagogy. Another strategy is to develop culturally sensitive awareness programs for administrators, higher education professionals, and faculty, and requiring attendance as an essential preventative method. Professional development will help challenge people to be more intentional around important and relevant issues and challenges in higher education. By creating spaces in which psychological safety is paramount and by treating each adult learner with dignity and respect, successful gains can be made at all levels. Furthermore, by reducing punitive, antiquated, and outdated measures both completion and satisfaction can be maintained. Support and appropriate referrals can be made with awareness, integrity, respect, and knowledge if a student needs additional support through the college or within the community. This may be through advising, tutoring, counseling, or any other college or community specialty resource. Many well-known organizations and entities within communities, nations, and globally provide crisis-call-lines, resources, and support for struggling students. Through faculty and peer support, higher education professionals can move this needle forward to de-stigmatize the negative effects of trauma on an adult learner's educational journey.

Conclusion

The actions one takes as a student, professor, or administrator can make a difference. Advocating for victims of abuse of any form may change the trajectory of someone's life.

In conclusion, no matter the color of skin, one's gender, sexuality, age, disability, or any other factor, who we are and where we come from matters. Our stories matter. Getting real for an adult learner is being safe enough to be who we are, where we are. Trauma-informed pedagogy allows a student to show up as they are in an environment of acceptance. Learning cannot occur in unsafe spaces. Adult educators can make a difference.

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