SEEING OUR VOICES – PILOT

Using Photovoice with Trauma-affected Black Women College Students within PWIs to Explore Success and Persistence

"Trauma is not the story of something that happened back then. It's the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people." -- Bessel Van der Kolk, 2014

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Introduction

Trauma, an emotional response to a terrible event (American Psychological Association, 2020), is changing the way people adapt and understand their lives and environment in the 21st century. Though trauma, violence, and human cruelty are not new concepts, the way we understand trauma and its impact on everyday life has changed (Douglas et al., 2008). While trauma impacts people of all ages, college-aged women are particularly vulnerable to trauma (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2012). The experiences of women are further traumatized by institutional, political, cultural, and social barriers (Thomas et al., 2009) which can impact all areas of life, including education, income, and health. In addition to these barriers, Black women, and other marginalized Women of Color, face racial trauma completely unique from Men of Color or White women (Thomas et al., 2009). This racial trauma can be further compounded in higher education, especially in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) that are often places of intense isolation and dejection for Black women (Robinson et al., 2013; Winkle-Wagoner, 2009). Because of the intersectional experiences of Black women, understanding their trauma experiences can be complex and multifaceted (Crenshaw, 1991). Effects of these experiences can impact every aspect of life, including successful adjustment in college.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and record the experiences of trauma-affected Black women who define themselves as successful at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) through photovoice. Photovoice is a visual method often used for engaging marginalized communities to present their view of the world.

Research Q's

What are the experiences of self-defined successful, trauma-affected Black women students navigating academic life at PWIs?

Sub Questions:
- How do trauma-affected Black women students define success?
- How do these students perceive institutional support?

Background

- College students have 67% to 84% higher exposure to Potentially traumatic events (PTEs)
  - College-age women are particularly vulnerable to trauma
  - Women of Color face trauma completely unique from Men of Color and White Women
- Trauma impacts all aspects of life, including how we learn
  - Decreased mental and physical functioning
  - Poorer academic performance
  - Decreased retention rates
- Retention of marginalized students is more complicated than non-marginalized students, especially within PWIs
  - Academic adjustment difficulties
  - Lower retention rates
  - Overall negative academic performance

Methodology

- This study follows a participatory approach by utilizing participant photography, field notes, and personal narratives. Data will be collected through documentary photography, called photovoice from seven to ten participants, or co-researchers, interviews, and focus groups.
- The participants had to identify as Black women at second-year or higher academic standing and have experienced one of the following PTEs during their lifetime: child abuse, sexual assault, combat-related trauma, natural disasters, serious accidents, death of a loved one, or life-threatening medical illnesses.
- Qualitative content analysis was used for the pilot study and will be used for the second phase of the dissertation.

Photovoice

I was walking around campus when I took this picture. As I'm staring down at my shoes, I noticed how far my feet have gotten me. I've endured so much pain and trauma, but my feet and legs never gave up on me. They always pulled through. Even when I was having the worst days, they still got me places. Oh, the places I've been with these two feet. This image represents my strength. No matter the adversity I face of being looked down upon, because I'm a minority, I've always pulled through and got to where I needed or wanted to be. I am blessed to be able to walk every day and I started to acknowledge that each and every day.

Preliminary Findings

We keep Persisting: The participants commented openly and frequently about their experiences as marginalized, trauma-affected women. The co-researchers discussed the strength and hard work they completed to get where they were today. No matter what adversity they had endured, they kept going. They persisted. They "made it out." See Figure 1 to the left. Although they started from impossible beginnings and had to overcome more than most, they continue to persist. each participant had to motivate themselves to keep moving forward. They pulled themselves together and kept "putting ourselves in positions that people wouldn't normally see Women of Color." They mentioned "tightening up your laces and doing it." This speaks to innate resilience to better themselves. These women continue to better themselves, even in an environment that was not built to serve them.

Being Happy. Interestingly, none of the participants directly correlates academic success in their definition. This speaks to the priorities of Women of Color, priorities that may not align with the mission of White students at four-year institutions. When asked how they define success, each participant mentioned happiness. "Success is finding happiness and peace within yourself, and finding your purpose and who you are and doing what you wanna do." Participants in this study see success as advancing themselves as Women of Color, as finding their purpose, and finding happiness in themselves. Finding the confidence to be themselves and not needing to hide who they are or their identities. Being unapologetically themselves is success.

Have to jump through hoops. One large theme emerged during the focus group conversation is the lack of belonging for each participant. Each participant expressed alienation and exhaustion from navigating a PWI. Often time, the institution was not seen as supportive, comfortable, or a place to heal. The co-researchers expressed frustration at the access and availability of certain services. They felt "it was just more of a liability for the university, like she already went through these hoops, so we're gonna give her access to the services." These services and the individuals working at them did not feel genuine. She was a liability that the institution had to cover.

Selected References

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