

IMPACT OF UNDIAGNOSED TRAUMA ON ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT OF UNDERGRADUATES IN NASARAWA STATE UNIVERSITY KEFFI, NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION

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Abstract

In recent years, Nigerians have been exposed to experiences that can best be described as traumatic. Many survivors of traumatic experiences are students at different levels of education, who may never have been diagnosed nor treated for trauma. This article investigated the impact of undiagnosed trauma on academic adjustments of undergraduates in Nasarawa State University Keffi, Nigeria. Survey research design was adopted. The population of the study comprised all 100 level and 200 level undergraduates in the Department of Guidance and Counselling, Nasarawa State University Keffi (NSUK). The study had two objectives, and research questions. A questionnaire designed by the researchers titled; Questionnaire on Traumatic Experiences (QOTE) was used for data collection. The questionnaire was validated by experts in the Faculty of Education NSUK. The validity index obtained was .757. It was further pilot-tested among 25 undergraduates of Guidance and Counselling Department who were not allowed to participate during the administration of the instrument. A test re-test method of reliability was used and a 0.82 reliability index was obtained. The statistics used were frequencies, percentages, as well as mean and standard deviation. The findings revealed that quite a number of respondents had traumatic experiences as a result, are negatively adjusted academically. It was concluded that so long as survivors of traumatic experiences are not diagnosed and treated for trauma, it is hard for them to adjust positively to academic activities. The need for trauma-informed education is, therefore, recommended in schools.

Key Words: Undiagnosed trauma, academic adjustment, undergraduates, trauma-informed education.

Introduction

In recent years, Nigerians have been exposed to several experiences and events that are capable of creating trauma. Traumatic experiences are gradually becoming part of global everyday life. They occur regardless of age, gender, religion, and social status. Traumatic experiences, according to

Adimula and Ijere (2018), are sustained psychological experiences that tend to significantly impair a person's daily functions. Traumatic experiences could range from, but not limited to, experiencing or observing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; childhood neglect; having a family member with a mental health or substance use disorder; experiencing or witnessing violence in the community like communal clashes; and Poverty/systemic discrimination (Menschner & Maul, 2016). Potentially, traumatic events according to Child Welfare Information Gateway (2014) may include abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional); being separated from loved ones (kidnapping); witnessing harm to a loved one or pet (e.g., domestic or community violence); natural disasters or accidents and unpredictable parental behavior due to addiction or mental illness among others. Experiences like insurgency, farmers-herders clashes, communal clashes, banditry, and sexual assaults are also trauma inducing. Trauma according to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) results from an event, a series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Trauma simply affects all facet of human life.

There is hardly anybody in Nigeria that has not had one form of traumatic experience or the other. Traumatic experiences now appear to be everyday occurrences hence, broadening the chances of more university students being affected. It is not surprising that majority of undergraduates have had traumatic experiences either before joining the institution or during their course of study in the university. According to *Friece (2015)*, more and more students are entering the school system, having experienced different forms of trauma such as violence, death, abuse, and illness. A study conducted by Read et al. (2011) among newly matriculated College students about direct and indirect traumatic experiences such as natural disasters, warfare, sudden death of loved ones, life-threatening illness, physical assault, sexual assault, and any other event that was life-threatening, caused serious injury, or extreme distress revealed that 66% of the respondents have had at least one traumatic experience. Grasso et al., (2012) examined the prevalence of traumatic exposure among college students and approximately 50% of the respondents indicated that they had experienced one or more forms of trauma. A study that examined exposure to trauma and associated symptomology among undergraduates revealed that 85% of the participants indicated that they had experienced a traumatic event within their life-time (Frazier et al., 2009). Many undergraduates in Nigeria may affirm to this yet undiagnosed.

Traumatic experiences could be an event, but they have long lasting impacts that are usually unforeseen and unanticipated by victims. Experiencing trauma has deep impact on emotional, social, cognitive and behavioral life of survivors (**Sinishtaj-Lekaj, 2015**). Trauma often has seemingly silent, but pervasive impact (**Hollingsworth, 2019**) hence, the need for survivors to disclose their experiences for possible intervention. However, until trauma survivors avail themselves of diagnoses, silence keeps them deteriorating mentally, thereby rendering them unfit in pursuing future ambition academically. This research found out the impact of undiagnosed trauma on the academic adjustment of undergraduates.

Being exposed to traumatic experiences creates a lot of adjustment problems for survivors, especially when the experience was never disclosed or discussed in anticipation for help. Among undergraduates, academic adjustment describes learners' readiness and ability to align with all academic expectations, such as personal study, attending lectures, doing all assignments, note taking

and all it takes to survive academic expectations and attain academic excellence. Academic adjustment refers to students' ability to adapt successfully to academic demands despite new and additional responsibilities (Credé & Niehorster, 2011), still displaying positive attitudes towards academic tasks, course materials, studying and academic effort. While some traumatized undergraduates may adjust positively to academic demands, others may adjust negatively. Although some researches show relationship between trauma and difficulties adjusting to post-secondary school, many students continue to function well, despite past traumatic experiences. Traumatic experiences in the life of students are sometimes associated with poor academic adjustment (Stoeber, 2001). With traumatic experiences, focus, attention, and the ability to recall, become difficult (Steele & Kuban, 2013). Trauma can affect learners' ability to maintain sustained and focused attention to learning activities. Similarly, impact can be in the areas of difficulty in thinking, learning, and concentrating; Impaired memory; difficulty switching from one thought or activity to another. Emotionally, victims experience Low self-esteem, Feeling unsafe, Inability to regulate emotions, Difficulty forming attachments to caregivers, Trouble with friendships, Trust issues, depression, and anxiety (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Traumatized students may experience decline in classroom activities, inability to concentrate, frequent flashbacks, fluctuating desire to avoid school and other places that might remind them about the traumatic experience (RAND, 2006). This can easily lead to stagnation or deterioration in academics because they are all in one way or another hamper positive academic adjustment. Day et al. (2015) noted that trauma experiences diminish academic performance and reduces social-emotional efficacy among students.

A research conducted by Abdullahi (2016) on the influence of traumatic stress on academic adjustment among tertiary institution students in Potiskum, Yobe State, Nigeria, revealed that significant difference exists in the academic adjustment of male and female students who experienced trauma, with male students having higher positive academic adjustments than the female students. On the basis of age, no significant differences exist in the level of academic adjustment of students below age 21 and those above 22 years who have had traumatic experiences. Trauma is also an unpleasant experience that causes someone to have mental or emotional problems usually for a long time (Adimula and Ijere (2018)). People who have had traumatic experiences, need to feel safe and loved, but when those who should know, like counsellors and parents lack understanding of the effects of trauma, they may end up re-traumatizing those affected. Being traumatized is one problem on its own but being re-traumatized is yet another dimension to the problem. Having traumatic experiences has a lot of negative effects on their victims depending on the individual and the type of traumatic events experienced. Exposure to traumatic experiences increases a person's chances for serious health problems and engaging in health-risk behaviors.

In order to curtail the impact of trauma on students, counsellors need to be exposed to Trauma-informed Practices (Gotham, Blum, & Campanella, 2014). This would reposition counselors in Nigeria for real life trauma services. Krumrei, Newton, and Eunhee Kim, (2010) surveyed 3,844 students across nine different institutions and found that 41% of respondents experienced mood difficulties and 29.2% reported experiencing interpersonal concerns, while 87% participants reported that their presenting concerns interfered with their academic and social lives (90%) on a moderate to severe level. This implies that students living with mental health disorders regardless of a formal diagnosis are at increased risks of academic and social impairment during their time at school, and potentially not completing their degrees. Individuals post-traumatic experience

demonstrated a decrease in their functioning and reported feelings of distress (Anders, Frazier, & Shallcross, 2014). Overall, research has identified a correlation between trauma and a decrease in the functioning of students (Major, 2019).

Note that trauma does no one any good. Therefore, undiagnosed trauma in the life of students at any level should be a concern to counsellors. While it is impossible to undo the traumatic experience, it is needful for counsellors and lecturers to work collaboratively, using the best available science, to screen, treat trauma victims and help them develop resilience (SCAN, 2013) to the impact of the trauma, a survival strategy that the traumatized need to know and practice. This is why trauma-informed education is necessary for all students, their lecturers, counselors and all stakeholders.

Statement of the Problem

Education is known as the key to growth and development of the society as well as the individual. In a view to fulfill this dream, many people enroll for university education, irrespective of their individual experiences. Undergraduates in Nasarawa State University come from different parts of Nigeria and are likely to have had nasty experiences at some points in life; yet, are in school to develop themselves. The experiences may be communal clashes, sexual harassment, banditry, and others. Some experiences would have past but the trauma that accompanied such experiences lives on in them even in school. Traumatic experiences are known to impact brain development and behavior in and outside the classroom/school. Lecturers and counsellor educators who interface with these students daily may not know the particular students who are traumatized because trauma is a mindset thing but affecting every facet of the human being. While on the one hand, traumatic experiences may be real among students, on the other hand also, traumatised students may never have been diagnosed nor treated. Not treating trauma at all in students could have negative impact on their academic adjustment. considering the inevitability of traumatic experiences in the lives of many Nigerians, this study is geared towards finding out the impact of undiagnosed trauma on academic adjustment of undergraduates in Nasarawa State University Keffi, Nigeria: implications for trauma-informed education.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. Identify students with undiagnosed traumatic experience,
- ii. Find out the impact of undiagnosed traumatic experiences on academic adjustment of undergraduates ofNsuk.

Research Questions

- i. What is the prevalence of undiagnosed traumatic experiences among undergraduate in NSUK?
- ii. How do traumatic experiences impact the academic adjustment of undergraduates in NSUK?

Methodology

This study adopted survey research design on the premise that traumatic experiences have already occurred without interference from the researchers. The researchers investigated the present state of the respondents with respect to traumatic experiences, so as to describe and proffer intervention to affected students. The population of the study comprised of 100 level and 200 level undergraduates

of the Department of Guidance and Counselling NSUK, totalling 98 and 130 (228) respectively. The entire population was used as sample for the study however, through simple random sampling, only 75 and 95 (100 and 200 level) students respectively participated voluntarily hence, a total sample of 170.

A self developed instrument containing 17 items titled; Questionnaire on Traumatic Experiences (QOTE) was used for data collection. It was a four point scale with; Strongly agree (SA) =4, Agree (A) = 3, Strongly disagree (SD) = 2, and Disagree (D) = 1. The instrument was made up of two sections. While section A comprised 5 items on the demographics of the respondents, section B contains items addressing traumatic experiences. The questionnaire was validated by experts in the Faculty of Education, Nasarawa State University Keffi. The validity index obtained was .757. It was further pilot-tested among 25 undergraduate students of the guidance and counselling department who were not allowed to participate during the main administration of the instrument. A test re-test method of reliability was used and 0.82 was obtained as a proof of the reliability of the instrument. Mean and standard deviation were used in analyzing the data.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Data of the Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Academic Level:		
100 Level	75	44.12
200 Level	95	55.88
Gender:		
Male	81	47.64
Female	89	52.35
Age:		
Below age 20	40	23.53
Above age 20	130	76.47
Marital status:		
Single	147	86.47
Married	21	12.35
Divorced	1	.588
Single parent	1	.588
Nature of experience:		
Communal clash	25	14.71
Sexual harassment	20	11.76
Banditry	09	5.29
Others	76	44.71
None	40	23.53

Table 1 reflects the characteristics of the respondents. Both 100 and 200 level, male and female undergraduates participated in this exercise. The majority of them were above the age of 20 years but few of them were below 20 years of age. While the majority of the respondents were single, some were married, but 0.588% of them were divorced and single parents.

With respect to research question One which investigated the prevalence of traumatic experiences among undergraduates, 14.71% experienced communal clashes, 11.76% had sexual harassment, 5.27% were exposed to banditry and 44.71% had other forms of traumatic experiences different from the ones mentioned however, 23.53% reported that they had no traumatic experience. This corroborated with earlier findings by Frazier et al., (2009) and Friece (2015), that students have had traumatic experience in their lifetime and many more students are entering the school system having experienced different forms of trauma. Similarly, Read et al., (2011) and Grasso et al., (2012) found that respondents (students) have had at least one traumatic experience. This suggests the need for trauma-informed education in institutions of learning.

Research Question 2: Investigated the impact of undiagnosed trauma on academic adjustment.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Impact of undiagnosed Trauma on Academic Adjustment

S/N	STATEMENT	\bar{X}	SD
1	I had some troubling experiences in the recent past	2.88	.425
2	The experiences I had keep bothering me	2.76	.62
3	No family member/friend knows about my experience (s)	1.99	.92
4	I am just tired of this life	2.69	.64
5	Thoughts about my experiences demoralise me	2.53	.73
6	I think about my experience(s) to the extent that I find it difficult to concentrate during lecture	2.42	.79
7	My experience makes me feel that I cannot cope in school	2.54	.80
8	As soon as my mind flashes back on the experience (s), I forget all I have been taught	1.99	.95
9	Whenever I make out time to study on my own, I end up focusing on my past experience(s)	2.49	.77
Grand Total		22.90	6.645

Table 2 shows that the respondents have had traumatic experiences in the past.

For research question two which investigated the impact of undiagnosed trauma on academic adjustment of undergraduates revealed that the experience demoralises, makes them lose concentration and focus, and discourages studying. This is possibly because they may not have sought for any form of intervention. The findings are in tandem with those of earlier researchers that traumatic experiences are sometimes associated with poor academic adjustment of students (Stoever,

2001), they create inability to concentrate, and cause decline in general academic expectations (RAND, 2006). Focus, attention, and the ability to recall become difficult (Steele & Kuban, 2013), and diminished academic performance as well as reduced social-emotional efficacy becomes evident (Day et al., 2015). The findings also support Adimula and Ijere (2018) who hold that unpleasant experience causes one to have mental or emotional problems usually for a long time. All these point to the need for special intervention.

Conclusion

Traumatic experiences are no doubt daily experiences these days. Their daily occurrence does not make them normal and acceptable to anyone because of the long lasting damage they do to human lives especially students. A number of undergraduates have been found to be traumatised hence finding difficulty making academic progress. With the understanding, it is important for counsellors to work on undiagnosed trauma among undergraduates so as to curtail its impact on students' academic adjustment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

- i. Trauma counselling be organised and rendered regularly by counsellors to undergraduates and stakeholders in NSUK
- ii. Counsellors be given trauma-informed education, in order to equip them to render same in the University. This would go a long way in increasing counsellors' understanding of trauma, and their ability to support traumatised undergraduates in NSUK.
- iii. Regular awareness creation about the negative impact of undiagnosed and untreated trauma on academic adjustment in students, should be given priority by the Department of Guidance and Counseling in the University.

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