

How do the Life Histories of Women who have Experience Domestic Violence Impact the ways they Decide on and Engage with Higher Education?

Dr Kelly Lewer, University of Wollongong, kellyl@uow.edu.au

Abstract

My doctoral inquiry focused on understanding the experiences of mature aged female higher education students who had experienced domestic violence. Guided by the concepts of Bourdieu's (1977) capital, field, and habitus this feminist narrative inquiry analysed the life histories of nine women from across the Australian state of New South Wales in relation to their resources and engagement within higher education. The findings presented in this paper point to the women's success through sheer determination and perseverance, the choosing to limit engagement outside of the classroom, and frustrations over a lack of understanding.

Keywords

domestic violence, higher education, student engagement

For my doctoral study, a feminist narrative inquiry methodology was used to collect and analyse the life histories of nine mature aged (over 21 years of age) female higher education (HE) students from the Australian State of New South Wales (NSW), all of whom had left a domestic violence (DV) relationship prior to enrolment. The inquiry was underpinned by Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of capital, field, and habitus - a conceptual lens through which to understand the women's resources and engagement within HE.

Within the literature, there has been recent attention on understanding the trajectories of HE students who have experienced gendered violence which may include DV (Burke et al, 2022), however little is known about the experiences of such HE students specifically in relation to DV. My inquiry builds on literature which focuses on students in similar situations who are enrolled in basic skills (Duckworth, 2014) and adult education (Horsman, 2000) courses. In addition, literature which looks at the engagement of mature aged HE students (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Chojenta, 2017; Podesta-Meaney, 2010) in a general sense provides context to my inquiry. Of these, Chojenta's (2017) acknowledgement that mature aged students may come to HE having experienced trauma including DV- "students who have lost their financially supportive partner due to death, divorce or escaping an abusive relationship"(Chojenta, 2017, p.89) - is particularly poignant in setting the scene. This paper shares the findings from my inquiry, providing nuanced understanding of HE students who have experienced DV.

DV (also known as domestic abuse or inter-partner violence) is control (physical, verbal, emotional, sexual etc.), within a relationship (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2018). Globally this abuse is experienced by approximately 25% of women and contributes to at least 38% of murders (World Health Organization, 2020). Although it is unclear how many women leave such relationships prior to enrolling into HE, the prevalence whilst currently enrolled provides context; for example, studies from Nigeria

(Benebo, Schuuman & Vaezghasemi, 2018), Chilea (Lafontaine, 2018) and the United States of America (Wood et al. 2018) point to the rate of HE students experiencing violence within a relationship as either equal to or higher than the relative national prevalence. The focus of these studies (younger students in dating or non-cohabitation relationships) differs to my inquiry where the focus is on mature aged students (over 21 years of age) who have left mostly long-term relationships.

In Australia mature aged students account for 41% of HE students, although it is not known how many of these have left violent relationships prior to enrolment. Broader societal statistics provide a glimpse, however, into the issue. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) one in three women experience some form of DV. Furthermore, 18% of women, and 4.7% of men have experienced sexual violence by a current or previous partner; 16% of women and 5.9% of men have experienced physical violence by a partner; and 23% of women and 16% of men have experienced emotional abuse within an intimate relationship. These broader societal statistics point to a significant issue, although it is acknowledged that the prevalence is likely higher as DV is an underreported crime (Birdsey & Snowball, 2016). Furthermore, it is noted that women are overrepresented in these figures. I understand DV as a gendered issue, a consequence of patriarchy (Oke, 2008; Hayes & Jeffries, 2016), whilst acknowledging that men also experience this form of violence, and that their experiences are equally valid and warrant further investigation.

According to Bruton and Tyson (2017), leaving such a relationship is complex and risky due to an elevated risk of further abuse, fear, isolation, economic, and legal issues. Similarly, Humphreys and Thiara's (2003) warn that ongoing abuse for the first 12 months of separation is common. For the safety of the women in my study, then, I set the selection criteria so that the women had been separated for at least three years before commencing HE studies. Even then some still experienced ongoing harassment. Despite challenges, such women rebuild their lives. The psychological concept of resilience assisted my understanding of this. Like Humphreys (2003), who argues that women like those in my study have "strengths and resourcefulness during times of great adversity" (p.148), I viewed the women in my study "from the framework of their strengths" (p. 148).

Bourdieu and HE

Bourdieu's (1977) concepts inform my understanding of societal interactions (Lewer, 2023) including the women's resources and engagement within HE. Capital refers to the different resources people accumulate, producing classes and inequality. Economic capital refers to wealth; cultural capital refers to education, knowledge and talents; and social capital includes friendships and support networks. These concepts provided a way for me to understand the classed preferences and opportunities of the women in my study. I was inspired by the many scholars who draw on Bourdieu's (1977) concepts to explore how students fare in HE environments, the inequalities that exist, and their transformations; for example, in a study of first-in-family women attending HE, O'Shea (2008) drew on Bourdieu to help understand their capital resources. A finding from this research which has relevance to my study is that she found that the students in her study often viewed HE as a social experience beyond the classroom. For the working-class

single mothers in Reay et al, (2002) study, however, like much of the mature aged student HE literature would suggest (De Silva et al, 2011), most felt overwhelmed by the burden of commitments (work, study, family), particularly caring commitments. For the women in Reay et al's (2002) study this impact limited their capital and they did not complete the course.

Bourdieu's concepts have also been used to understand the impact of DV; for example, Larance and Porter (2004) found that DV had reduced all forms of capital, particularly social capital. Although there is scant information available in relation to how this reduction in capital would impact students, the work of Duckworth (2014) offers some insights. Her study, in an adult learning college and basic skills course, is a helpful example of using Bourdieu's concepts to understand the impact of DV on students. She found that the students who had been impacted by DV experienced a negative impact on their learning due to a reduction in various forms of capital. Despite this, she found that the participants also received many benefits from their education.

Methodology

A feminist narrative approach placed the women central to the inquiry (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992), providing space and time for them to deconstruct their experiences, beliefs, and influences. Birdsey and Snowball (2013) suggest that women like those in my inquiry may not have previously spoken of their experiences due to shame and silence. For many of the women in my inquiry, the interviews were the first time they had spoken about how their past had impacted their current education. All welcomed the opportunity to sit down and speak about their success and challenges as a HE student.

The design of my inquiry was inspired by other examples of feminist narrative research; for example, Oke's (2008) cross-cultural study of women's experiences of DV and the rebuilding of their lives. Using semi structured interviews allowed the women to direct the conversation and Oke was able to listen to their stories. This approach also assisted the women in my inquiry to feel comfortable to engage in the interviews. To answer the main research question - How do the life histories of women who have experienced DV impact the ways they decide on, and engage with HE? - I collected and analysed the life histories of nine students from across the state of NSW.

The following sub-questions guided the research design and the analysis of research data:

- How have the women's life histories influenced their decision to undertake HE?
- How has their economic, cultural, and social capital influenced how they negotiated HE?
- How did HE study impact the ways women, who have experienced DV, rebuild their lives? This paper will focus on the findings specific to social engagement.

This inquiry was approved by the University of Wollongong Human Ethics Research Committee (2015/145). According to the World Health Organization (2001), such research participants are considered 'vulnerable'. The provided guidelines informed my research, recommending caution, whilst offering the possibility of benefits from such research.

Participant Recruitment

My research information was available in the waiting rooms of DV support services across the state of NSW via a community-based organization, Domestic Violence New South Wales (DVNSW). The following criteria was designed to reduce the risk of harm and to capture information-rich participants:

- Women must be over twenty-one years of age
- Women will need to have been out of any relationship involving DV for over three years.
- All women will have studied at HE for at least three years.

Eleven women made email contact after seeing the research information. Two did not fit the criteria and were given information about DVNSW and related activities. The nine women who participated came from rural, regional, and city locations throughout NSW.

Data collection

Written and oral data from the women and researcher's perspective informed the findings (Creswell, 2013). The women were invited to participate in two semi-structured interviews, six months apart - during which time they were invited to keep a participant diary. The interviews took place at a venue and time of the women's choosing - cafes, or university library meeting rooms in their hometowns and cities. The interviews were interactive conversations with semi structured questions. The women were aware that myself as the researcher had a similar background, however, no further details were provided. At the commencement of the first interview, each woman chose a pseudonym which was then used throughout the project (these pseudonyms are used in the following findings). During this interview, the topics of impact of HE, friendships, support, and future were introduced. The second interview further explored themes which emerged from the first interview. The diaries were returned to me during this second interview. The women were free to include experiences they felt were relevant.

Data analysis

Using a coding tree in QSR NVivo 11, analysis of the transcribed interviews and diary entries was guided by the sub-questions and Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) in order to understand changes in the women's dispositions over time. This coding tree was refined and added to with the analysis of subsequent interviews. From there, informed by the data, a narrative using the words of the women was written, and loosely organized chronologically from childhood till the current university studies. The focus of these narratives was educational experiences; however, as the women were free to discuss what they liked, some information was included about how attempts at education were impacted by abuse, including resources available at this time. These narratives were member-checked before being as a collective to understand the shifts in capital as the women entered various educational settings during their lives.

Findings

At the time of my doctoral inquiry, Sophie (44), Lynda (55) and Claudia (45) were studying Bachelor of Psychology, Mary (41) Master of Nursing, Rachel (51) and Nancy (44) Doctor of Philosophy, Dawn (51) Master of Social Work, Amelia (27) Bachelor of Social Work, and Tamson (34) Bachelor of Arts (Honours). These findings represent the following pivotal moments in the women's narratives: Before the experience of DV, during the experience of DV - complexities of capital, and after the experience of DV Engagement with HE. The following quotations from these women are direct quotations from my thesis (Author, 2019).

Before the experience of domestic violence

Most of the women were from middle-class backgrounds having had families with positive dispositions towards education - private school education, HE educated parents, and/or professionally employed parents. Sophie, Mary, Rachel, Claudia, Lynda, and Dawn were brought up in families where there was considerable encouragement for education, and/or privileged experiences with schooling. School was a place where they enjoyed friendships and the encouragement of teachers. Mary, Claudia, and Lynda attended private schools where they described enjoying extracurricular activities and arts; for example, Claudia, recalled her sense of belonging and love of school swimming carnivals:

you know I used to go to the change rooms and get into the special costume and everyone at the pool just chanted and there was war-cries across the pool, and it was just, yeah, marching out in that team.

Positive dispositions towards education made HE imaginable for Sophie and Mary, even though their parents had not attended HE themselves. School was Sophie's "fun place" (Author, 2019, p. 60) where she enjoyed friendships, whereas Mary enjoyed the encouragement of her parents who had migrated from Europe and understood the relationship between education and future opportunities. She described her parents support of her education:

always encouraged [her, never pushed [her], never forced [her].

In contrast, Rachel and Claudia came from families where there was an assumption that they would attend HE. In Rachel's words, her family:

always had an assumption that everybody would go to uni [HE] and always an assumption that we would try to do well.

Although Lynda and Dawn also had similar schooling experiences (private school for Lynda, and a strict English public school for Dawn), their family support was limited. Both experienced abuse within their families which reduced their confidence. School was a place of safety. In Dawn's words:

primary school years were fantastic because I hated being at home.

Nancy also grew up with the experience of abuse; however, school was not a place she enjoyed, it was a place where she felt bullied. Finally, Tamson and Amelia grew up in

homes with professionally employed parents, both ran away from home with an abusive partner at a youthful age.

Following their school education, these women had differing trajectories. Mary, Rachel, and Sophie attended HE studies following high school, whereas Claudia's long held dream of HE was replaced with vocational studies due to a distracting experience of undiagnosed ADHD. Lynda, Nancy, and Dawn followed pathways into what could be described as traditional women roles of the time – nursing and retail.

During the experience of domestic violence- Complexities of capital

This data is included as it relates to HE engagement by providing an insight into the fluctuations of capital the women had experienced prior to their enrolment. The impact of ongoing control by the women's abusive partners was debilitating on all forms of capital. Most of the relationships were long-term, but they ranged from a few years to twenty years, with an average of ten years. All but one of the women had children within these relationships. Most lived in rural or regional areas in NSW. Some were in what might be regarded as working-class relationships and others in middle-class relationships. Sophie, Amelia, and Rachel for example, were in single income relationships where their partners worked: their focus was on caring for their young children and homes. Rachel sought employment once her children were older. Mary, Tamson, Claudia and Lynda, on the other hand, were in middle-class relationships and were employed in either full-time or part-time work.

Resentment and consequent withdrawal from friendships was a common theme across the women's narratives. The women shared information about their diminishing friendship networks as they tried to put up a façade that all was well within the family. Lynda described how the home she owned with her then husband hid the abuse:

a beautiful home, the pool, land, horses. The house was huge, it was made out of bush rock, it was just absolutely beautiful; from the outside [it] looks like a very wealthy, happy family and that is what people don't realise, it's usually [not], and that [misinterpretation] was one of the things my husband used over me.

While Claudia owned real-estate with her husband, she viewed it as a disadvantage and a barrier to how others may perceive her:

From the outside in, we looked like a David Jones [department store] Christmas brochure. Like we had the big tree, the big house, we had the lot and it was just fake; If you are not safe in your own home, you don't have a home.

Speaking about her friendships during this time, Claudia stated:

During the relationship I had very few friends and that was part of his behaviour. He would destroy my friendships;

A lot of people very early on told me to get out but I couldn't, it was too dangerous, it took years to plan and get out safely, so very few people understand that and that impacted friendships.

Similarly, Dawn, explained how her friendships fared during her violent relationships:

It has been really hard to be my friend because I have been so involved in violent relationships and we know through DV you don't keep friends because people can't be around you or my husband isolated all of my friends and that is just you know the nature of DV. We don't make close friendships

Nancy also described how friendships were used as a form of control:

friendships were monitored; usual techniques of isolation, involving threatening people, trying to isolate friends, and making [her] feel paranoid about friend's motives so there was almost nobody [she] could talk to.

For Amelia, the youngest woman in the study, entering an abusive relationship during her teen years also had consequences on her social capital:

I did not go to my prom or anything like that.

Being in an abusive relationship caused Amelia to feel that she was different to her peers, and a burden to them;

I always felt like that was going to encroach on other people.

After the experience of Domestic Violence: Engagement with higher education

Engagement with academic staff played a significant role in the women's feelings of satisfaction. Most enjoyed the feedback and encouragement from academic staff. For Dawn, this helped her confidence grow. In her words, she was "spurred on" and "knew [she] could do it". She described this feedback as "the best experience of university". Like many of the women, however, seeking support did not always feel this satisfying for Dawn. When she considered contacting the general student support at her university, she thought to herself, "oh no, they are going to think I am no good and mark me down". She recognised these thoughts as "that shame thing again" (Author, 2019, p. 116). Dawn felt it would be helpful if there was someone she could talk to who would be "non-judgmental and confidential", who understood both university policy as well as "the barriers" experienced by women like herself.

As she neared completion, Dawn was looking forward to her graduation in her "gown and hat". This anticipation was crushed by both her mother's dismissal of her achievement: "Oh Dawn don't be ridiculous you are an adult, it's just for the young ones, you just get a certificate anyway"; and the expenses involved in travelling to the university, accommodation, and graduation fees. Although Dawn contacted the university to explain

her situation, they did not offer any assistance. Instead, Dawn missed her graduation. In celebration, she instead purchased a ring via a pre-purchase payment installment plan as her “silent victory”. Dawn felt that missing her graduation “perpetuates the whole thing [experience of DV]” because no matter how much you get away from it, it will still be there”.

Similarly, when it came to seeking support from the HE in relation to academic consideration, Claudia wished for more understanding:

I think it would have been nice to have a little bit more understanding and not have to go into detail, so to say ‘I have to go into family law court, I won’t be there this day,’ and for them to say ‘ok well you don’t have to be there this date’ but maybe there needs to be a little bit more understanding that maybe there is a bit more going on, it would have been probably helpful, but that is in the individual level.

Tamson attended a small HE campus which was set up to cater for ‘non-traditional’ students - where staff understood her needs and set up a homework room for her children whilst she studied. Tamson credited this support to having staff members who had comparable stories to herself:

Our tutors were just amazing; they let me bring my kids to class if they were sick. You know quite willing to let someone take notes for you if you had to run off and get a sick child or my kids seem to live at the university library. Often after school we would go back there to the library, and they would give them a room to sit in and watch TV while I did work. I can’t say enough about them. They were fantastic. I think one of the managers had a similar story to myself. I think that might have helped they were wonderful. Everyone I came across was wonderful.

Across the women’s narratives there was little interest in activities offered by the universities outside of the classroom. For Amelia, such activities and culture were irritating. In her words:

I enjoy having fun as much as the next person as well and I wish could say “hey let’s study all day, chill out and drink,” all that kind of stuff ‘cause I still like doing all those things, just don’t do them often. And I guess I envy that, and other people to. I guess I am aware that we really are all different levels in class, they are very carefree, and I don’t even know if I was ever like that so I just get really funny feelings so you know, like I am not buying uni [university] hoodies, and you know doing things in groups and stuff like that, I am more of just a bit of a loner I think, you know.

Sophie described her connections, keeping the focus on engaging academically:

I suppose it is also a different arena, you are mixing with people who are likeminded, talking about similar issues. Your friends are not always on the same wavelength you know. When you pick a course, you are all interested in a specific field. So, you

know you have comments online that interest you. And yeah, that is something that has added interest to my life.

For Rachel, leaving a violent relationship meant a total relocation and loss of social capital: “We didn’t know anybody, and we didn’t know what we were going to do, so I was pretty desperate actually”. Whereas Claudia was deliberate in the way she separated her HE studies from friendships: “I wasn’t there to socialise, I was there to get into class and get out of class and get my studies done”. Similarly, Lynda explained that she “didn’t want anybody’s baggage in [her] life” and viewed fellow students as “more like acquaintances”.

Tamson was the only woman in this study who broadened her friendships at university and engaged in activities outside the classroom. Her enthusiasm led to her representing the university at various engagements, employment as a tutor, and a new circle of friends with the many mature aged students at the campus (including her now husband). These opportunities inspired a new sense of self, evident in changes in the cut and colouring of her hair, and new choices in clothing and footwear:

I felt like I could take on a new persona. I cut my hair really short and I just took on a whole new persona. I changed my hair colour. I now wear high heels.

The women constructed their own wellbeing by their own means and choosing. There was no evidence that the HE environment contributed to this. In some cases, the financial burden of being a student impacted their decision-making towards wellbeing - for example the food the women chose to cook for their children changed.

Rachel: “*We would have sausages and mashed potato, the worst food. School came first*”. Claudia often served her children “scrambled eggs”, also in favour of providing her children with a good education.

For Amelia, an insight into her current decisions around food and lifestyle was captured when she spoke candidly about how she perceived her future once she graduates:

Oh my God, when I finish uni, I am going to work, I am going to go on holidays, and I am going to hopefully buy a new car before that. I really just like to move out of my house, I would just like to work and be in a job that I love and kind of live a better life really, I just be happy that HE is going to help me get that kind of dream, to get that job, buy the food I want, and provide a stable, fun life. We are really big on fun, me and the kids, it is kind of a new outlook we have on life. I am hoping that is what is going to happen when I graduate.

Like most of the women in this study, relationship separation impacted Mary’s economic capital; however, perhaps due to her managerial position, she appeared to have more options. She was able to purchase a home and commence postgraduate studies. Her cultural capital from her Catholic School days assisted Mary to feel comfortable, indeed “at home” at university.

HE enabled Lynda to make new choices in her life: she described this time as one where she was able to have “a different level of conversation”. She found herself taking on “new ways”, completely changing whom she chose to interact with, and, as she says below, having “a whole different mindset about a whole different perspective on life.” Reflecting on what this meant in relation to her cultural background Lynda said:

I heard someone once ask me that ‘being Indigenous, being in a violent relationship, quitting that, why did you go to university?’ and I said, ‘well, it’s basically the opening and its basically getting away from mindset that you belong in that poverty type area’.

She credited her HE studies with a new sense of self-identity.

I think really deep down when you have been put into this situation and your life has been controlled and you come out and you do go into university. I am not saying everybody will do that, I am saying that you will find that the person you are is in there.

Rachel was the only woman to speak about feelings of safety whilst on campus. During the time between the interviews, she graduated and gained employment at her university. She reflected on her feeling of safety within the university environment. From her diary:

3 August 2015 It [HE] has offered me a safe place & challenged me over and over to step up & be ME”.

A few weeks later the feeling of safety had changed:

22 August 2015 This week was horrible. Uni has always been a safe place for me. But this week my former partner sent me an email - to my student email a/c [account]. He used to stalk me after we split up. I was hopeful he’d stopped. While his email was dressed in ‘nice’ terms it was not nice. I was so shaken that I had to leave work for the day in order to arrange to have my uni student email account deleted & go to the police. While I was a student, I felt I had time to heal from many of the effects of domestic violence And my former partner didn’t have access to me there. So, this email frightened me & brought back old memories.

Although mostly a distance education student, there were times when Lynda was required to attend her university campus. This impacted her wellbeing because she spent most of her time distracted by searching for her estranged daughter, whom she lost contact with during separation. Lynda captured this experience in her diary:

14-10-18 8:00am Day of final. Concerned. 4:30pm Well I got over the exam and not sure how I feel. I should have been more focus but every time I go to uni I look for my daughter who is also a student. This is her last trimester and I have not seen her for years. Her father told her if she has anything to do with me, he will never speak to her again. I can’t even go to her graduation.

15-10-15 Woke up this morning feeling a little disappointed about the exam and that fate did not arrange for me to bump into my daughter.

All the women felt that HE had improved their confidence and opportunities. These victories were personal and not shared with other students or staff. For Sophie, this was having goals to work towards: *“University gives me confidence; it gives me a goal that I could actually achieve”*; Whereas for Nancy, although she also experienced an increase in confidence and skills, she spoke about what this meant for her family in relation to financial independence and security:

I mean it [PhD/HE study] has brought me my career. I am now teaching, that is what I do for work. So, it [confidence] kind of enabled me to get through the divorce with my Australian partner because I now have skills which I can translate into currency to keep me and the children safe and secure. So, it [university studies] has given me a lot more confidence, certainly it has allowed me to have the kinds of conversations regarding. “This [control] isn’t for me and I am not going to do this anymore.” You know like: “this is where it stops. I can see where this is going and I am not participating in it”.

Rachel, Claudia, and Lynda’s experiences at university had a positive impact on their recovery. In her diary, Rachel wrote *“03/08/2015: uni has been a catalyst for change & healing in my life”*.

Similarly, Claudia expressed a connection between attending university and the start of her recovery. She was aware that the familiarity of education contributed to this:

After the relationship I was a shell - similar to an empty box, I knew I wanted to feel alive again, worthy and be able to support others. Studying Psychology was a means to start that journey. Going back to education was comforting, familiar and safe.

Lynda spoke about the way her HE studies contributed to a deep reflective process of finding herself:

I think really deep down when you have been put into this situation and your life has been controlled and you come out and you do go into HE. I am not saying everybody will do that, I am saying that you will find that the person you are, is in there.

Discussion

The main themes of this narrative inquiry signal pivotal moments in the women’s lives-before the experience of DV, during the experience of DV and after the experience of DV: Engagement with HE. Understanding the women’s experiences before being in a violent relationship provides insights into their educational dispositions as instilled during their childhoods. Furthermore, insights into their experiences during their violent relationship provides an understanding of the fluctuations in capital they experienced prior to enrolment at HE. For all the women, this impacted the resources they had as they entered the HE environment. Insights into how their lives after the experience of DV captures how

they navigated HE, including their engagement with other students, and their level of comfort.

Before the experience of domestic violence

Although open to women of any socio-economic background, the women in my study were from mostly middle-class backgrounds, and just over half had experienced or witnessed abuse during childhood. Data from large population surveys across many countries point to the indiscriminate risk (Ellsberg et al. 2000) and impact (Ellsberg. 2008; Kishor & Kiersten, 2006) of DV regardless of education or classed position.

As most of the women were engaged in either private schooling, or had encouraging parents with positive dispositions towards education, their childhoods were the site where these positive attitudes towards education were instilled. As Bourdieu (1977) would suggest, these deeply ingrained dispositions (*habitus*) set the women up for a lifelong love and interest in education, providing cultural capital despite various experiences which were distracting and reduced confidence - such as the experience of abuse for many of the women – bullying at school (Nancy), witnessing or experiencing abuse, adolescent onset of ADHD (Claudia), and entering an abusive relationship within adolescence (Tamson and Amelia). For most of the women, completing high school was a milestone; however, most moderated their career choices, with only Mary, Rachel and Sophia enrolling into HE following high school. According to Bourdieu (1977), though, *habitus* is not easily broken, and as their life histories indicate, the comfort of education was something they would all seek.

During the experience of domestic violence - Complexities of capital

Understanding the women's experience of DV is included because it provides an insight into their fluctuations of capital, which would continue to impact the women as HE students. Within the experience of a DV relationship, most of the women continued to have a middle-class lifestyle. The misconception that DV occurs to women from less affluent backgrounds has been challenged by Rosie Batty (2015), an Australian woman whose son was murdered at the hands of his father (an act of family violence): "I want to tell people that family violence happens to anybody, no matter how nice your house is, no matter how intelligent you are" (p. 257).

Furthermore, Weitzman's (2000) found that "The myth [that abuse occurs only among lower classes] becomes a type of institutionalized oppression for the upscale" (p. 8). Further explaining this finding in an interview published Shapiro (2017) Weitzman states:

Higher-income people hide behind what I call a veil of silence.... They believe it's only happening to them. No one can hear you scream on a 3-acre lot..... The woman is often disbelieved when she comes out.... People will say, 'Look at your husband, look at your lifestyle. (p.1)

For many of the women in my study, this was certainly the case - at times their economic capital disguised the abuse, including the control of their social connections. For example,

this was the case for Lynda and Claudia - the description of their houses, and Claudia's reflection of how it hid the truth was a poignant detail in my inquiry which illustrated the complexities of capital for these women. This fluctuation of capital sets my inquiry apart from much of the mature aged HE literature which largely focuses on students from a working-class background (De Silva et al. 2011; Reay et al. 2002).

After the experience of domestic violence- Engagement with higher education

After leaving their violent relationship, all of the women experienced a reduction in economic and social capital and a squashing of cultural capital particularly in the form of confidence. This bears similarity to Larance and Porter's (2014) finding in relation to social capital:

Women who have been victimised by domestic violence, however, often have diminished stocks of social capital available for their use. This is so because they have usually been secluded from supportive familial and friendship networks by their abusers, who have kept them isolated and dependent. (p.678)

and differs from O'Shea's (2008) first-in-family participants who enjoyed such socialising beyond the classroom. Most of the women in my study (face-to-face and distance education), excluded themselves socially, whilst enjoying academic conversations. It was the perception of having a unique situation which became a barrier to engaging with other students outside the classroom. Although the mature aged students in Podesta-Meany's (2010) study also refrained from socialising (mostly due to competing life commitments), most of the women in my study, whilst busy with life commitments, made comments which inferred that they felt different to other students and as such desired to keep their backgrounds private. Although the women described a variety of social engagement activities provided by the universities, such as cafes, bars, university branded clothing and outings, most did not participate in these. In fact, for many of the women, hearing talk of these social occasions made them feel uncomfortable. Tamson seemed to fare the best in relation to being the most included. She was the only woman in this study who broadened her friendships at university. She attributed this to her small intimate campus setting where she felt able to socialize with students and teachers, leading to eventually meeting her current husband.

Academic staff played a pivotal role in assisting the women to achieve their successes in their education in relation to feedback from assignments translating into a boost in confidence for most of the women. For the most part, the academic staff were unaware of the women's unique circumstances, and this feedback was provided in a standard format. It is unclear what the impact would be if the academic staff had knowledge of the women's circumstances and if this would have been beneficial or not. When it came to support for their circumstances, this drew a mixed response from the women. Some who did not seek support were adamant that they were able to be independent. Others who wanted to seek support about issues related to their past were disappointed when they could only find academic support. The women who were able to access support beyond their academic needs, felt that the general student services offered to all students lacked understanding of the unique situation students find themselves in following the experience of DV. This finding echoes the work of Laing, Irwin and Toivonen et al. (2010) who found

that within settings such as mental health services, support for women who have experienced DV was also offered in a generic manner. Again, Tamson had arguably the highest level of satisfaction. She attended a small campus which was set up to cater for 'non-traditional' students - where staff understood her needs and set up a homework room for her children whilst she studied. Tamson credited this support to having staff members who had comparable stories to herself. It was these practical measures and lived experience that made the difference for Tamson.

The reconstruction of the women's cultural capital is a similar finding to Oke (2008) and Duckworth's (2014) participants, although they were not specifically HE students. What is different, however is what was motivating the women in my inquiry in relation to their choice for HE and their courses. They were spurred on by their comfort within education (from their middle-classed backgrounds) and their goals to help women like themselves. These goals are similar to those which are described in the literature for women who have experienced DV (Pain, 2014; Wood, 2017). What is different about the women in my study, however, is the specific choice to attend HE to become a professional to achieve this.

Most chose to study courses in the 'helping disciplines'- nursing, psychology and social work. According to the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2018) 20% of enrolments are within the discipline of Society and Culture, and 16% are in Health. From this data, the attrition rates in the courses chosen by the women in my inquiry were approximately: nursing 26%, social work 38%, psychology 26% and education 32%. Hamshire, Jack, Forsyth, Langan and Harris (2019), found that nursing students in particular are vulnerable to considering and discontinuing their studies. They identified three systems which may influence such decisions: "the students' personal system, the HE education system and the clinical education system" (p. 6). While the women in my inquiry did not reveal that they had considered discontinuing their studies, these identified systems may have impacted their motivation and engagement in HE. Their own personal system in the form of their goals to help other women combined with a need for financial independence fueled their determination to succeed.

Recommendations

My study has provided nuanced understandings of how middle-class women may fare as HE students having left a violent relationship prior to enrolment. To improve policy and practice within HE, recommendations related to the findings presented in this paper include:

- More acknowledgement of this cohort within universities from a strengths-based perspective. This assists such students to feel represented, seen and understood.
- More family friendly spaces and timetables - the setting up of designated homework spaces for school-aged children, including family friendly library spaces for parents who need to bring their children to HE with them after school hours, would assist parents and children in such circumstances. Scheduling classes at times which do not clash with getting children to and from school and more flexible learning options such as remote study.

- Establish specific DV support on campus either through specific staff training or providing space for a specific DV support service organisation on campus.
- Universities are not traditionally in the business of providing a therapeutic culture in the sense that health care settings do; however, Chojenta (2017) acknowledges many mature aged students, have been impacted by a variety of traumas. For the women in my inquiry, they viewed their studies as part of the way they were rebuilding their life. Within HE, the Person-Centred Nursing Framework (McCormack and McCance, 2006), may offer a new approach to foster care towards students. This approach has been initiated in the HE setting. For example, Middleton and Maroney (2019) reflect on a curriculum designed to model the principles of Person-Centered Care to nursing students. Further investigation is needed to know what impact this approach would have on women like those in my inquiry.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that the women in my study persisted mostly through their own determination and persistence - a result of the cultural capital accumulated from their early schooling and positive family dispositions to education. There are likely to be many other women, who did not meet the criteria for this study, who were unable to make it to HE, or who were unable to continue.

The women who participated in my study responded to information which had been placed in DV support services across the Australian state of NSW. This would suggest that they were women who had sought connection with a support service whether it be through employment, volunteering or seeking support or connection. Therefore, my study did not capture women who were not in contact with DV support services at the time of recruitment. In addition, my study attracted mostly middle-class women as participants. This was an unexpected angle for the project, and it is unclear why this occurred. It could be that HE in the aftermath of DV is more likely to attract women with middle-class dispositions, and/or only those who have adequate cultural and economic capital are able to take on HE studies. Little is known, then, about women who had hoped to, but were unable, to attend HE or, like the single mothers in the Reay et al. (2002) study, women who had commenced HE but were unable to complete.

Furthermore, greater diversity in the sample would provide a more robust understanding of the impact of culture on the engagement in HE of students who have experienced DV.

It should be noted that men also experience DV. Although the statistics show that women are more likely to experience this form of abuse, this is an underreported crime. As such, it is unclear how this factor impacts the statistics for men. Scholarly works which focus on understanding the experiences of men who are impacted by DV are scant. Understanding the trajectories of men who have experienced DV is an area of research which needs attention.

Conclusion

This article has presented findings from a doctoral study which gathered and analysed the narratives of nine women after leaving a violent relationship and commencing HE. The narratives were understood within the context of Bourdieu's (1977) concepts – capital, field, and habitus. This article has focused on understanding these narratives in relation to three key periods of the women's lives - before, during and after the experience of DV. They succeeded through sheer determination and perseverance, mostly choosing independence over support, but with varying levels of frustration over a perceived lack of understanding and acknowledgement within the HE environment.

References

- Abbott-Chapman, J. (2006). Moving from technical and further education to HE: An Australian study of mature students. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 58(1), 1-17. doi:10.1080/13636820500507666
- Author, (2019)The impact of their life histories on the ways women who have experienced DV decide on and engage with universtiy study
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016). 4906.0 Personal safety, Australia, 2016. Retrieved from Canberra: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0>
- Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2018) Selected HE Statistics- 2018 Student data. Retrieved from <https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2018-student-data>
- Batty, R. (2015). Rosie Batty: By teaching children, we can change the culture of violence against women *The Guardian: Australian Edition*, 3 Dec 2015.
- Benebo, F. O., Schumann, B., & Vaezghasemi, M. (2018). Intimate partner violence against women in Nigeria: a multilevel study investigating the effect of women's status and community norms. *BMC Women's Health*, 18(1), 136–136. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-018-0628-7>
- Birdsey, E., & Snowball, S. (2013). Reporting violence to police: A survey of victims attending DV services. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. Retrieved from http://www.victimsclearinghouse.nsw.gov.au/Pages/victims_clearinghouse_research_db/victims_clearinghouse_research_database_domesticviolence/researchdatabase_dv_birdsey_snowball.aspx
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge HE Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Bruton, C. & Tyson, D. (2018). Leaving violent men: A study of women's experiences of separation in Victoria, Australia. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 51(3), 339–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004865817746711>
- Burke, P. J., Coffey, J., Cocuzzoli, F., Hardacre, S. L., Parker, J., Ramsay, G., & Shaw, J. (2022). Understanding the impact of gendered-based violence on access to and participation in higher education. Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle, Australia. Retrieved from <https://nova.newcastle.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/uon:39760/ATTACHMENT02?view=true>
- Chojenta, P. (2017). Students in enabling programs need support not deterrents. *International Studies in widening Participation*. Retrieved from <https://novaajs.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/index.php/iswp/issue/view/6>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks : SAGE Publications.
- De Silva, S., Robinson, K., & Watts, R., C. (2011). UWS – Mature age student equity project. Retrieved from https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/391361/MASEPFinalReport121012.pdf

- Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs. (2018). The development of the Power and Control and Equality Wheels. Retrieved from <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-Development-of-the-Power-and-Control.pdf>
- Duckworth, V. (2014). Learning trajectories, violence and empowerment amongst adult basic skills learners Retrieved from <https://www.routledge.com/Learning-Trajectories-Violence-and-Empowerment-amongst-Adult-Basic-Skills/Duckworth/p/book/9781138282919>
- Ellsberg, M., Jansen, H., A. F. M., Heise, L., Watts, C., H., & Garcia-Moreno, C. (2008). Intimate partner violence and women's physical and mental health in the WHO multi-country study on women's health and DV: an observational study. *The Lancet*, 371(9619), 1165-1172. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(08)60522-X
- Ellsberg, M., Pena, R., Herrera, A., Liljestrand, J., & Winkvist, A. (2000). Candies in hell: women's experiences of violence in Nicaragua. *Social Sciences and Medicine*. Retrieved from [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(00\)00056-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(00)00056-3)
- Hamshire, Jack, K., Forsyth, R., Langan, A. M., & Harris, W. E. (2019). The wicked problem of healthcare student attrition. *Nursing Inquiry*, 26(3), e12294–n/a. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12294>
- Hayes, S., & Jeffries, S. (2016). Romantic terrorism? An auto-ethnographic analysis of gendered psychological and emotional tactics in DV. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 6(2), 38.
- Horsman, J. (2004). 'But is it education?' The challenge of creating effective learning for survivors of trauma. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 32(1/2), 130- 146. 159
- Humphreys, C., & Thiara, R., K. (2003). Neither justice nor protection: women's experiences of post-separation violence. *Journal of Social Welfare & Family Law*, 25(3), 195-214. doi:10.1080/0964906032000145948
- Humphreys, J. (2003). Resilience in sheltered battered women. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 24(2), 137-152. doi:10.1080/01612840305293
- Kishor, S., & Kiersten, J. (2006). Reproductive health and DV: Are the poorest women uniquely disadvantaged? *Project MUSE Mission*, 43(2), 293. doi:10.1353/dem.2006.0014
- Lafontaine, Guzmán-González, M., Péloquin, K., & Levesque, C. (2018). I Am Not in Your Shoes: Low Perspective Taking Mediating the Relation Among Attachment Insecurities and Physical Intimate Partner Violence in Chilean HE Students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(22), 3439–3458. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516632812>
- Laing, L., Irwin, J., & Toivonen, C. (2010). Women's stories of collaboration between DV and mental health services. *Communities, Children and Families Australia*, 5(2), 18-30. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2011.645243
- Larance, L. Y., & Porter, M. L. (2004). Observations from practice: Support group membership as a process of social capital formation among female survivors of DV. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19(6), 676-690. doi:10.1177/0886260504263875

- Lewer, K. (2023). Capital, change and Elsie's Place: Understanding the history of safe accommodation in Australia. *Public Health Nursing (Boston, Mass.)*, 40(1), 191–194. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.13149>
- McCormack, B., & McCance, T. V. (2006). Development of a framework for person-centred nursing. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 56(5), 472–479. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2006.04042.x
- Middleton, R. & Moroney, T. (2019), "Using person-centred principles to inform curriculum, *International Practice Development Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1. doi:10.19043/ipdj.91.010
- Morgan, K., & Thapar-Björkert, S. (2006). 'I'd rather you'd lay me on the floor and start kicking me': Understanding symbolic violence in everyday life. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29(5), 441-452. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2006.07.002
- Oke, M. (2008). Remaking self after DV: Mongolian and Australian women's narratives of recovery. *Australian New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 29(3), 148-155. doi:10.1375/anft.29.3.148 162
- O'Shea, S. (2008). Choices, challenges and changes: Exploring transition, persistence and engagement for first generation, female HE students. HE of Sydney, Sydney. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Choices-challenges-and-changes-Sarah-OShea-PhD-Thesis.pdf>
- Pain, R. (2014). Seismologies of emotion: fear and activism during DV. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 15(2), 127-150. doi: 10.1080/14649365.2013.862846
- Podesta-Meaney, B. (2010). ULTRIS Research Report 2010, Under pressure: The mature aged student: Pressures of first year experience Retrieved from http://www.student.uwa.edu.au/__data/assets/rtf_file/0008/1886867/PodestaMeaney_Paper.rtf
- Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). 'It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end': Mature students on access courses and HE choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5-19.
- Reinharz, S., & Davidman, L. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shapiro, E. (2017). DV Among the Wealthy Hides Behind 'Veil of Silence'. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/domestic-violence-among-the-wealthy-hides-behind-veil-of-silence>
- Weitzman, S. (2000). *Not to People Like US: Hidden Abuse in Upscale Marriages*: Basic Books.
- Wood, L. (2017). "I look across from me and I see me": Survivors as advocates in intimate partner violence agencies. *Violence Against Women*, 23(3), 309-329. doi:10.1177/1077801216641518
- Wood, L., Voth Schrag, R., & Busch-Armendariz, N. (2020). Mental health and academic impacts of intimate partner violence among IHE-attending women. *Journal of American College Health*, 68(3), 286–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0744841.2018.1546710>
- World Health Organization. (2020). *Violence Against Women*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

World Health Organization Department of Gender. (2001). Putting women first: Ethical and safety recommendations for research on DV against women. Retrieved from Geneva, Switzerland: <https://www.who.int/gender/violence/womenfirtseng.pdf>

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the School of Education, University of Wollongong where I completed my doctoral studies, and the women who participated and shared their stories with me.