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Francisco Carrillo-Alvarez
francisco.carrillo@uconn.edu

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Associations Between Trauma History and Dimensions of Self-Concept in College Students

Francisco Carrillo-Alvarez

Department of Psychological Sciences

University of Connecticut

Abstract

Past research in the literature of the self has considered the influence of potentially traumatic or adverse events. In this study, we aim to explore this relationship among undergraduate students utilizing various measures of self-concept including global self-worth, self-concept clarity and domain specific measures of self-perception. Various measures were administered to 308 participants that aimed to determine the instances of potentially traumatic events experienced and the subjective level of distress, in addition to the self-concept measures of global self-worth, self-concept clarity and the domain specific measures of self-perception including self-fulfillment, autonomy, and emotional self-adjustment. The results reveal that global self-worth was related to both instances of potentially traumatic events and subjective level of distress, while self-concept clarity only predicted the instances of potentially traumatic events. In terms of domain specific self-perception, emotional self-adjustment, but not self-fulfillment nor autonomy predicted either conceptualization of trauma or adversity. The discussion centers on how individual appraisals of self-concept play a role in the experience of traumatic events and how clinical implications can result in increased psychological wellbeing and functioning.

Introduction

Most individuals report experiencing at least one potentially traumatic event (PTE) in their lifetime (Knipscheer et al., 2020). PTEs refer to exposure to threatened death, serious physical or psychological injury or sexual violence that may occur after directly or indirectly witnessing an event, learning of a traumatic event occurring to someone in proximity, or repeated confrontation with aversive details of a traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In recent years, research on the prevalence of PTEs has focused on general population studies. An analysis of 29 different types of PTEs in 24 countries revealed that around 70% of participants (n = 68,894) endorsed being exposed to at least one PTE in their lifetime (Benjet et al., 2016). Another study estimated the lifetime prevalence of PTEs and other highly stressful life events to be 71.1% (n = 6,457) (Knipscheer et al., 2020). Among exposed subjects, one-week PTSD prevalence was 2% as determined by the endorsement of posttraumatic stress symptomatology. Although general population studies are informative, their scope is characteristically broad, which consequently fails to study the nuances and underlying developments in specific or target populations.

One population of increasing interest is undergraduate students, among whom estimates of PTEs range between 84%-94% (Frazier et al., 2009; Vrana & Lauterbach, 1994). Furthermore, studies have reported an estimated PTSD prevalence rate of 12% among those who endorsed experiencing a traumatic experience (Bernat et al., 1998). One study of a community sample suggested that the peak age for trauma exposure is 16 to 20 years of age (Breslau et al., 1998), making undergraduate students a critical population. Therefore, undergraduate students may be at high risk for experiencing PTEs and, further, to develop PTSD symptoms, which may lead to an array of other adverse psychological outcomes including depression, anxiety, substance abuse,

and suicidal ideation (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2013). One study found that trauma-exposed undergraduate students reported increased functional impairment, decreased engagement in academic responsibilities, challenges with activities of daily living, and disengagement in social interactions (Anders et al., 2012).

One key psychological aspect that might be affected by traumatic experiences is one's self concept. Self-concept refers to a person's total perception and beliefs regarding him or herself (Carter & Bruene, 2019; Gewirtz-Meydan, 2020). Self-concept is composed of structural components, such as self-concept clarity (SCC), and specific contents, including self-esteem and self-knowledge (Campbell et al., 1996; Neemann & Harter, 2012). SCC refers to the extent to which the contents of the self-concept are clearly and confidently defined in a consistent and temporally stable way (Campbell et al., 1990). The presence of SCC is associated with positive psychological outcomes such as relationship success, resilience, coping, and wellbeing (Hayes, 2020). Another structural element of self-concept, self-esteem, constitutes a positive or negative attitude towards the self (Turner et al., 2017). Individuals who demonstrate high self-esteem feel quite positive about their characteristics and abilities, which can positively influence their daily functioning and psychological wellbeing (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Turner et al. (2017) argue that self-esteem increases well-being by encouraging and reinforcing positive self-appraisals when individuals experience distress, an idea consistent with those who posit self-esteem to be a protective factor against adverse psychological experiences or potentially traumatic events (Arslan, 2016; Besser et al., 2015; Hebert et al., 2018; Stevens-Watkins, 2014).

The literature on conceptions of the self highlights debates on what best constitutes its construction, proposing either a general global evaluation (general self-concept) or self-relevant domains (domain-specific self-concept). Sowislo and Orth (2013) suggest that the evaluations

have a predictive capacity for the outcomes measured at the same level; that is global evaluations have a predictive ability for outcomes measured at the general level whereas domain-specific evaluations have a predictive ability for outcomes measured at the specific level.

A recent longitudinal study proposed a convergent argument between general self-worth and domain specific self-esteem and suggested a top-down approach in which global self-esteem influences domain specific self-esteem over time (Rentzsch & Schroder-Abe, 2022). Theorists of domain-specific self-worth have focused on individual areas such as self-fulfillment (*how a person sees themselves in relation to achieving the aims and objectives of their life*); autonomy (*the perception of the extent to which each person makes decisions about their life in accordance with their own criteria*); honesty (*the extent to which a person considers themselves to be honest and decent*); and emotional adjustment (*how a person sees themselves in relation to emotional adjustment or regulation*) (Goñi et al., 2011). These individual domains facilitate a more differentiated picture of an individual's self-evaluations (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2022). For example, individuals could evaluate themselves positively in the self-fulfillment domain (“*I am satisfied with what I am achieving in my life*”) and negatively in the emotional adjustment domain (“*I am an emotionally weak person*”). One study suggested that each domain may serve an adaptive function by motivating behaviors, such as specific interpersonal strategies to achieve aims and goals and further mitigate any emotional dysregulation (Kirpatrick et al., 2002).

Associations between traumatic experiences and self-concept have been explored in theoretical and empirically-focused investigations, particularly the component of self-esteem. Studies across diverse populations have found that children, adolescents, and young adults who have experienced a traumatic event tend to have significantly lower levels of self-esteem (Li et al., 2020; Beck et al., 2016; Besser, 2014; Dion et al., 2019; Frazier et al., 2011; Kircaburun et

al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2020; Stopa et al., 2010) and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996; Carter & Bruene, 2019; Hayes, 2020). Individuals who endorsed the presence of emotional neglect and emotional abuse also self-report low levels of self-esteem (Arata et al., 2005; Reyome et al., 2020). Turner et al. (2017) expand on this idea and argued that those with lower self-esteem may believe that they are unworthy and disliked by others.

Few studies have elaborated on self-concept clarity and adversity among undergraduate student populations (Carter & Bruene, 2019; Stopa et al., 2010). One study of undergraduate students examined how SCC relates to anxiety and depression in social settings, suggesting that higher SCC is related to lower social anxiety and depression (Stopa et al. 2010). Another touched upon college students' self-perceptions and identity change, arguing that college students' identity changed over a period of time and that those whose changes led to identity development exhibited higher self-concept clarity (Carter & Bruene, 2019). Although these studies consider self-concept clarity as a measure of college students' self-concept, the history of trauma and SCC among undergraduate students remains largely unexplored.

Traditionally, the literature on domain specific self-concept tends to focus on children, adolescents, and adults, but not college or undergraduate student populations (Neemann & Harter, 2012). Donellan et al. (2015) discussed the Self-Perception Profile for College Students, which was developed using data from around 300 college students. One study looked at college students' domain-specific self-concept in relation to satisfaction with life, arguing that SCC, more specifically the self-fulfillment domain, explained a great deal of personal development associated with wellbeing (Goñi et al., 2015). Another study explored how work values or "tendencies within the work environment" relate to specific interpersonal and interpersonal domains, in addition to overall general self-esteem and how these can have significant effects in

professional development and psychological wellbeing (Makri-Botsari & Stampoltzis, 2020). Research focused on domain-specific self-concept among college students has been conducted, yet the role of domain specific self-concept on undergraduate students' trauma history remains largely unexamined. Characterizing how college students' traumatic experiences relates to their domain specific self-concept would provide insight into the underlying processes involved in self-concept and what areas can further strengthen individual wellbeing.

The current study aims to expand the existing knowledge on the relationship between trauma history and self-concept among college students in the U.S. Based on the literature review above, we hypothesize that greater lifetime exposure to traumatic events would be associated with lower levels of self-worth and self-concept clarity. As a second hypothesis, we expect greater exposure to traumatic events to be related to lower levels of the domain-specific categories of personal self-concept: self-fulfillment, autonomy, and emotional self-adjustment.

Methods

Participants

In an effort to control for recently experienced PTEs, we used pre-screening to recruit individuals who had not experienced a PTE in the previous six months and who were not suffering from an experience prior to that. Participants were: 60% White/European-American, 20% Asian/Asian Indian/Pacific Islander, 9% multiracial, 7% Latinx, 3% Black/African American, 1% Arab/Middle Eastern, between the ages of 18 and 27 (mean = 18.98, SD = 1.09). In terms of gender, the sample was 82% female, 17% male, <1% non-binary, and <1% transgender male. With respect to religious affiliation, the sample was 30% Roman Catholic, 20% Non-denominational Christian, 10% Agnostic, 9% Other, 11% Atheist, 4% Hindu, 3%

Protestant, 3% Jewish, 2% Buddhist, 3% Muslim, < 1% Orthodox (such as Greek or Russian), with the remaining portion 5% of the sample leaving their affiliation blank.

Procedures

Participants (N = 308) completed an online survey lasting approximately 30 minutes for research participation course credit. The study was approved by the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board in accordance with ethical research practices.

Measures

Criterion A Traumatic Events. The Life Events Checklist for DSM-5 (LEC-5; Weathers et al., 2013) includes 17 items corresponding to Criterion A PTEs that participants endorsed in any of the following ways: *happened to me, witnessed it, learned about it, part of my job, not sure, doesn't apply*. For the purpose of this study, the focus was on events that happened to participants.

Subjective Level of Distress. Following previous research studies utilizing a single-item measure of distress (“What is the most stressful or traumatic event you have ever experienced?”) (e.g., George & Park, 2020) the current study asked “How stressful was this experience on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all stressful) to 7 (extremely stressful)?”

Domains of Self-Concept. Three domains of self-concept were measured using the Personal Self-Concept (PSC) Questionnaire: self-fulfillment (six items), autonomy (four items), and emotional adjustment (five items; Goñi et al., 2011). Higher scores indicate a more positive self-perception within a given domain, whereas lower scores signal a more negative one. The measure used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*).

Self-Esteem. Self-esteem or global self-worth (GSW) was measured using the Self-Perception Profile for College Students (SPPCS; Neeman & Harter, 2012). Participants read six

pairs of statements (one pair for each item) and endorsed one of the two statements as *really true for me* or *sort of true for me*. Depending on which of the four selections they made, they were scored from 1-4 depending on whether they selected the positive or negative statement and their level of agreement. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem, while lower scores indicate lower self-esteem.

Self-Concept Clarity. Self-concept clarity was measured using the Self-Concept Clarity (SCC) scale, which consists of 12 items that measure the degree to which beliefs about the self are stable and clearly, confidently, and consistently defined (Campbell et al., 1996). Higher scores indicate greater clarity, whereas lower scores indicate more confusion. The measure used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Data Analysis

Multiple regression analyses were conducted in R to test for the unique and combined effects of trauma history and subjective level of distress (for the most stressful event) on self-esteem, domains of self-concept, and self-concept clarity.

Results

Simultaneous Multiple Regression

In order to understand how subjective and objective characteristics of exposure to PTEs might influence different aspects of self-concept, multiple simultaneous linear regression models were run to see which were influenced most by objective (number of types of PTEs) and subjective (most stressful event) characteristics. Both number of type of PTEs ($\beta = -.12, p = .04$) and level of stress during the most stressful event ($\beta = -.14, p = .02$) were negative predictors of GSW (see table 1), whereas only number of events ($\beta = -.15, p = .01$) negatively predicted SCC (see table 2). Among specific domains of self-concept, only one (emotional adjustment) was

predicted by either of the trauma measures, of which the number of events was also a negative predictor ($\beta = -.16, p = .01$) (see table 3). The significant, negative prediction of both variables for GSW, in comparison to just the number of events for SCC and emotional adjustment, was surprising. The null associations between subjective level of distress and all self-concept measures except for GSW was also unexpected, while the null associations between number of events and autonomy and self-fulfillment were less so (see table 4 & 5).

Table 1

Simultaneous Regression Predicting GSW from Trauma Measures

<i>Predictor</i>	β [95% CI]	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i> = 271)	<i>p</i>
Number of Types of Potentially Traumatic Events	-.12 [-.24, -.01]	.06	-2.06	.04
Most Stressful Event	-.14 [-.26, -.02]	.06	-2.35	.02

Table 2

Simultaneous Regression Predicting SCC from Trauma Measures

<i>Predictor</i>	β [95% CI]	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i> = 271)	<i>p</i>
Number of Types of Potentially Traumatic Events	-.15 [-.27, -.03]	.06	-2.53	.01
Most Stressful Event	-.05 [-.20, .05]	.06	-.09	.37

Table 3

Simultaneous Regression Predicting Self-Fulfillment from Trauma Measures

<i>Predictor</i>	β [95% CI]	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i> = 271)	<i>p</i>
Number of Types of Potentially Traumatic Events	-.09 [-.21, .04]	.06	-1.39	.17
Most Stressful Event	-.07 [-.20, .05]	.06	-1.19	.23

Table 4*Simultaneous Regression Predicting Autonomy from Trauma Measures*

<i>Predictor</i>	β [95% CI]	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i> = 271)	<i>p</i>
Number of Types of Potentially Traumatic Events	.03 [-.10, .15]	.06	.42	.68
Most Stressful Event	-.01 [-.13, .11]	.06	-.17	.87

Table 5*Simultaneous Regression Predicting Emotional Adjustment from Trauma Measures*

<i>Predictor</i>	β [95% CI]	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i> = 271)	<i>p</i>
Number of Types of Potentially Traumatic Events	-.16 [-.30, -.04]	.06	-2.59	.01
Most Stressful Event	-.11 [-.23, .01]	.06	-1.78	.08

Discussion

A growing body of literature has demonstrated the significant effects that traumatic events and adverse circumstances can have on self-concept across children, adolescents, and adults (Campbell et al., 1996; Carter & Bruene, 2019; Bingbing et al., 2020; Beck et al., 2016; Besser, 2014; Dion, 2019; Frazier, 2011; Hayes, 2020; Kagan, 2020; Simpson, 2020; Stopa et al., 2010). Some research has included the consideration of a multi-dimensional measure of self-perceptions in addition to general global evaluations (Goñi et al., 2011; Rentzsch & Schroder-Abe, 2022; Sowislo & Orth 2013). Efforts to develop these measures among undergraduate students have been identified, yet the relationship between domain specific self-concept and traumatic events remains largely unexplored in said population (Neemann & Harter, 2012).

The aims of this current study were to expand the existing literature on the association between trauma history and various measures of self-concept among undergraduate students including global self-worth, self-concept clarity, and domain specific self-perceptions. Although previous studies have analyzed self-concept and trauma history across diverse populations, few have focused on college students and the role of self-concept clarity and domain specific self-evaluations. For these reasons, the results of this study are crucial for understanding the nuances and underlying associations between self-concept and history of trauma among undergraduate students.

Our results indicate that greater lifetime exposure to traumatic events and subjective level of self-reported distress predicted lower global self-worth (also known as self-esteem). These findings suggest that the mere exposure to increased traumatic events can have detrimental effects on an individual, which can in turn result in negative appraisals of the self. Individuals victimized in multiple instances and in various circumstances are more likely to make negative reflected appraisals which can result in increased symptoms of distress (Turner et al., 2017). The existing literature conceptualizes self-esteem as a positive or negative appraisal of the self and further suggests that those with increased negative appraisals of themselves can feel a lack of confidence in their characteristics and abilities, while simultaneously thinking they are despicable and disapproved of by others (Turner et al., 2017). Various factors can contribute to an individual's appraisal of an event as traumatic, which can in turn affect how an individual would assess the event as distressful or psychologically unpleasant. These negative self-perceptions can be related to decreased psychological wellbeing (Kim et al., 2022; Shaffer & Kipp, 2010) and daily functioning (Ander et al., 2012) among undergraduate populations.

In the present study, we also explored the role of self-concept clarity (SCC) and its association with history of trauma. We found that the number of traumatic events but not the subjective level of distress, significantly predicted SCC. These findings suggest that history of traumatic events can predict psychological distress via a disrupted sense of self-concept. Cumulative exposure to adversity in early life may disrupt the typical developmental process in identity and the self, which can result in an unclear sense of self (Hayward et al., 2020). This is consistent with prior research that links traumatic events to SCC and further suggests that these may help explain the development of a range of psychopathologies (Hayes, 2019; Hayward et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2015).

Lastly, we explored the role of self-fulfillment, autonomy, and emotional self-adjustment on traumatic history of traumatic or adverse events. We found that only emotional self-adjustment, but not autonomy and self-fulfillment, was significantly related to both the presence of traumatic events and subjective level of self-reported distress. Although these measures are related and can be categorically defined as an individual's general self-perception, they are also interdependent of each other (Goñi et al., 2011; Rentzsch & Schroder-Abe, 2022). This suggests that each particular domain can influence an individual's self-appraisals in different dimensions which can in turn impact various aspects of an individual's well being and psychological functioning. For instance self-fulfillment can be related to satisfaction with life dependent upon reaching certain goals and achieving certain aims. On the other hand, autonomy can play a role in the development of self-determination or self-sufficient functioning. It is interesting to note that emotional self-adjustment was the scale for which the strongest correlation was found on both instances of traumatic events and the subjective rating of distress. Emotional self-adjustment entails a formulation of how a person sees themselves in relation to emotional

adjustment or regulation. Attaining a high level of emotional regulation can have integral developmental implications on the way in which an individual deals with or copes with adversity. In the presence of potentially traumatic events, self-adjustment can play a role in the affective appraisal of an event as either negative or positive (Goñi et al., 2015). Positive emotional adjustment can have clinical implications as it allows for a positive cognitive evaluation of the self, which might in turn increase psychological wellbeing while simultaneously decreasing the development of unfavorable symptomatology.

Limitations

While the results presented here are useful to understand the relationship between trauma history and self-concept among undergraduate populations, there are certain limitations worth noting. First, the data was collected using self-report measures, which raises concerns about response bias. Considering the nature of the questions measuring the history of traumatic experiences, it is possible that some individuals did not fully disclose their exposition to possibly traumatic or adverse events. Second, our study exclusively focused on the experience of traumatic events among college students, further limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research is needed to discover if the findings presented here are generalizable to other demographic populations.

Another limitation of our study is that we have relied on theory and past research to determine feasible variable relationships and interpret the study results. The data in this study is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, making it difficult to determine causation and the directionality of effects in addition to any potential confounds. Thus, the results presented here serve as a starting point for future work. While defining traumatic events or experiences as instances of the event taking place allows us to account for the accumulation of past traumatic or

adverse events, it does not represent the total effect traumatic events can have on an individual. Future research is needed to investigate the influence of multiple instances of either the same or multiple potentially traumatic experiences and how these play a role in an individual's subjective appraisal.

Conclusion

The present study explored the association between various measures of self-concept and trauma history among undergraduate students. Greater exposure to traumatic experiences was related to lower self-worth, self-concept clarity, and domain-specific self-concept measures of self-fulfillment, autonomy, and emotional self-adjustment. Instances and appraisals of traumatic or adverse events appear to be important factors that may explain the relationship between potentially traumatic experiences and self-concept. More research is needed to better understand the causal pathway, yet the current study posits that negative self-concept may reduce individual wellbeing and potentially increase the development of various psychopathologies. Clinical interventions should focus on encouraging and reinforcing positive self-appraisals in both the general domains and the domain specific categories as these might mitigate the detrimental effects of cumulative traumatic and adverse experiences.

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