Educating Survivors: The Traumatic Effects of Sexual Assault on Student Academic Achievement in Graduate Education

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Many educational and trauma psychologists have studied the impacts that rape and sexual assault have on the well-being of undergraduate students. However, few have analyzed the traumatic impact such events have on students after their undergraduate careers. This work looks at how students respond immediately and the years following a rape situation as they encounter the academic demands of graduate level education. Based on a study I ran in the Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia, this work scrutinizes the academic achievement differences in these two groups. This analysis uses the constructs outlined by psychologists regarding the added academic expectations in graduate education and studies involving the responses undergraduate students have in the classroom after experiencing similar scenarios. This will show the huge lulling impact such trauma has on a graduate student. In so doing, this work illuminates the dramatic impact that trauma can have on a student’s mind and shows that no matter what level of higher education a student is encountering this trauma in, the effects on a student’s learning capacity are drastic. Moreover, this work outlines for educators the added challenges their students may face who are in similar situations. This article is dedicated to Dr. Paul Menzer and Dr. Kerry Cooke who proved to be the most understanding and caring educators I have experienced in my academic career.

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A common topic in many psychology studies involving trauma and students involves investigating undergraduate students who have experienced sexual assault or harassment on college campuses. Few psychologists ponder what drastic effect this might have on graduate students, however. It is important to understand the impact on both student populations as the traumatic impact is massive on both groups of young adults. The following work examines how graduate students are affected by rape situations and how their response is similar to but differs from what may be observed by others in the undergraduate sphere. In order to accomplish this task, this work will address the academic rigor of graduate school and its effect on student achievement as well as how added stress from a traumatic situation can exacerbate the negative outcomes of stress. In so doing, this work illuminates the dramatic impact that trauma can have on a student’s mind and shows that no matter what level of higher education a student is encountering this trauma in, the effects on a student’s learning capacity are drastic. It is important as educators to understand the challenges faced by students in order to respectfully engage with these students in a classroom setting.

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Differences Between Graduate and Undergraduate Learning Environments

It is no mystery that graduate school has different expectations than an undergraduate environment. In fact, the design of the curricula often switches from a constructivist form of teaching to an instructivist mindset in graduate education due to content covered and academic approaches (Temiz & Topcu, 2013). Because of this, psychologist will agree that even the approach in teaching students will be less hands-on at the graduate level (Bowen & Rudenstine, 2002). This can lead to added stresses when it comes to homework and other assignments. In undergraduate education, the expectations in a classroom vary as not all courses are designed for students going into the field being taught (Box et al., 2015). Particularly at institutions that are geared towards general education requirements, undergraduate education may have courses with students engaging in course material that truly has nothing to do with their future career path. Graduate education approaches curricula quite differently.

In graduate school, masters and doctoral programs are designed specifically to guide students towards their career path. Most students coming to graduate school have a general basis from their undergraduate experience and are coming to attain greater skill in one particular area. The rigor of the course load increases with this specificity evolution. In fact, psychologists have found that the rigor of the graduate school environment alone can cause students stress to increase in classwork that used to be the most enjoyable for them in their undergraduate careers (Kozioff et al., 2010). Because the undergraduate basis for most programs involves courses outside the student’s major, the courses that fall within their field tend to be the least stressful in undergraduate curricula. That said, in graduate school, every course falls under this category making the change to instructivist curricula in their field of study a difficult task (Gregerman, 2016; Sliwa, 2013). In 2018 there was a study where graduate students and undergraduates had to report their stress levels and the results showed far higher stress ratings for the graduate students (Bruner, 2018).

It is important to decipher the difference between these two expectations in order to grasp how there is already a greater stress level for graduate students at a base level. Any graduate student whether he, she, or they have experienced trauma or not will have an increase to their stress levels in those courses (Napolitano, 2015). Understanding this is hugely important as we begin to investigate how sexual trauma can impact graduate students in the coming analysis. Without understanding this basis, the comparison between the two academic environments would be less impactful.

Studying Stress Differences Between Graduate and Undergraduate Students

With the understanding that graduate school is already incredibly stressful at a base level, it should come as no surprise that graduate students experience more stress after sexual abuse which has a greater impact on their school work. But the question as to exactly how much of an impact has never been tested. Because of this, I selected to investigate the impact on college students studying in or around the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia who were currently studying for their undergraduate or graduate degrees to get a sample comparison indicating these differences. In this test I had the students fill out a survey of questions indicating their stress levels. Some students were obviously not survivors of sexual trauma, but that portion of the sample served as the control group. Those who experienced childhood sexual trauma reported that it impacted their work a little bit, and those who were more recently assaulted responded that it had a major impact on their work throughout their college careers.
What was most interesting in these results however was not the undergraduate students responses as much as the graduate students responses. There are plenty of studies tracking the impact of trauma on undergrads that show a significant correlation between lowered academic achievement and sexual assault survivors on college campuses (Withey, 2010). The 2018 and 2019 studies are particularly strong examples of this research on effects that exist in higher education (Raymond & Corse, 2018; Jordan et al., 2019). However, the academic regression that was specified on the graduate student forms was far more detrimental to student success. The reasoning for this could be the fact that the courses are a different level of rigor in graduate classrooms, as analyzed earlier in this article or it could possibly be campus resources. While this in no way alludes to ignorance on behalf of colleges it is an interesting observation, I will circle back to momentarily.

**Results From the Study of Sexual Assault Survivors**

The results showed a statistically significant difference in the amount of stress expressed by graduate students compared to that of the undergraduate population. This was so drastic in fact that the grading curve changes in graduate students work sometimes dropped grades or GPA from the 3.5-3.75 range to the 2.0-2.75 range. This shows that letter grades dropped by almost one and half points for students in graduate school curricula, while undergraduate students only seemed to drop by approximately 0.5 (Budd et al., 2016). These differences in grading were quite different for the graduate students who evidently experienced a larger drop when it came to academic success post trauma.

What is perhaps the most intriguing point in the study however was that graduate students were more likely to take a medical leave of absence for mental health reasons from their programs than undergraduate students were experiencing the same sexual abuse issues (Triplett, 2012). While both instances are horrifying, why was it that graduate students were more prone to having to take breaks from their studies? The answer became evident with the added commentary many added under the “anything else we should know” option of the questionnaire. Almost all of the graduate students who took a break said that the stress of graduate school was hard enough without having to cope with trauma and that the added stress made academic completion seem nearly impossible. While most undergraduates sought out extensions, most graduate students took time off to get more intensive therapy or continue their studies after a bit of a mental health reprieve.

**Important Ideas Regarding These Achievement Differences**

The take-away from these results is rather simple. Graduate students are reporting a higher level of stress resulting from trauma leading many to take some sort of a break in their studies. Graduate students have trouble concentrating on academics when facing the post-traumatic stress issues that result from sexual abuse. It is highly likely that if an educator teaches a student who experiences these problems that the student will ask for at least an extension on their work or, quite possibly, a medical leave from the program as a whole. This study illuminates that undergraduate and graduate students experience extreme stress post-sexual trauma, but that the students in the undergraduate programs are more likely to just turn in work late rather than take time away from the program as a whole. Understanding these trends is important for faculty in academia to comprehend the trends in behavior so that they are not surprised if a student reacts with a need for an extension in these circumstances.
Support Services and Educating Survivors on College Campuses

Earlier there was a mention about facilities available to students in undergraduate versus graduate environments on campuses. The schools I studied each had a mental health program in place at their health center and most all had a connection to a woman’s center to help women facing the difficulties surrounded by these instances. In fact, all but one campus had a club that specifically educated students on the difficulties surrounding sexual assault on college campuses. So there are many resources and avenues out there to help these sexual assault survivors (Anderson, 2016). That said, most of the mental health centers had a limited number of appointments available to graduate students compared to undergraduate students. This means that graduate students often have to seek out community centers or therapists off of the campus to receive help after a certain number of sessions with the school counselor (Klein, 2018). This is just an observation to note as there is a trend in different avenues of care for undergraduate and graduate mental health at different institutions. While financially these logistics may make sense, it is important to understand the impact it may be having on those experiencing trauma.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, educators need to be made aware of these varying issues. Graduate instructors are already aware of the rigor their courses have built into the curricula, but they may not be as aware of the impact sexual trauma can have on academic achievement (Anderson, 2017). While it is not the job of the graduate instructor to serve as a therapist for the struggling student, it is immensely important that they show sincere understanding to those struggling with the drastic issues that the student is facing (Beaver, 2017). Sexual abuse is shown throughout my study as well as many others to have an immense impact on student achievement. Being aware of the added stress that trauma brings upon a student due to post traumatic issues can be incredibly helpful for a professor teaching a student who is coping with trauma. It is our job as educators to understand the impacts to help those struggling.

Conclusion

In essence, this study provides citable proof that there is a definitive stress difference between graduate and undergraduate student academic achievement after facing sexual trauma. Moreover, this study illustrates that there is often a difference in extensions needed between these two groupings of students including (but not limited to) more time on assignments or taking a mental health leave from the program as part of the recovery. This study shows that sexual assault can have a drastic impact on student work and that the horrors of that abuse cannot only impact personal issues within the student but work within the classroom as well. It is through studying this that we can become more informed educators and construct stronger mesosystems for survivors of sexual trauma.

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