

Shared Wounds: Examining Collective Queer Trauma and Its Impacts on Friendships

Project Purpose

This study will use ethnographic methods to examine the effects of collective trauma on friendship-building among queer individuals. The queer experience is frequently informed by trauma arising from social stigma and pathologization (Kelly et al., 2020; McGuire, 2022). While they are commonly found together in the world, queer individuals do not experience trauma innately because they are queer but because of the stigma produced by systemic and interpersonal homophobia and transphobia (Kelly et al., 2020). This study will focus on external psychological trauma: the pathologization of queerness, heterosexism, and the internalization of hegemonic cis heteropatriarchy. The term queer will be used as an umbrella term to define all LGBTQ+ individuals. The effects of collective trauma will be examined in creating relationships between two individuals, mainly focusing on platonic relationships (or friendships) rather than romantic or sexual ones. For many queer individuals, support for their identity is something that is received from places other than their family. Because of this, queer individuals primarily turn to friendship networks to gain a sense of support (Robinson et al., 2024). This will be a pilot study of 6 college-aged queer individuals to refine my interviewing and researching skills before actuating this into a more extended study.

Existing research suggests that the chosen families of queer individuals help navigate each other through collective trauma to gain an understanding of their positionality within the community (Robinson et al., 2024). The direct effect of collective queer trauma on the friendship-building of queer individuals has gone under-researched, leaving a gap in understanding the potential for trauma to be a source of community formation, relationship-building, and the reinforcement of social bonds. Furthermore, this work will highlight potential ways for the collective to overcome trauma, resisting its negative impacts on the health and well-being of queer people. By utilizing ethnographic methods to engage with queer survivors of trauma, this work will stray away from psycho-medical models of pathologizing queer identities and instead probe the socio-cultural systems which foreground anti-queer oppression.

Project Goals

This project aims to understand what trauma looks like for queer individuals. This trauma gets carried through hegemonic power structures to create a collective sense of trauma specifically for queer individuals. The duality of the collective will be examined in terms of how it serves as both a challenge and a resource in creating a sense of self in the community. I aim to explore how this collective trauma gets understood across the queer community and how the collective informs friendships and queer intimacy on a platonic level.

Research Methodology

Study participants will identify as queer and will be recruited through personal networks of college students as well as through snowball sampling among existing contacts. Participants

will be asked to participate in one 30-45-minute semi-structured interview over Zoom. Since this will be preliminary work that will not be published or presented at any conference, I will not seek approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) at this time. However, to be mindful of research ethics, I will complete CITI certification through Chapman University's IRB. This pilot study will be used to refine the interview questions for a later project for which I will seek IRB approval.

Each participant will sign a consent form and be assigned a pseudonym in the paper and presentation produced after data collection. I will ensure that the participants are fully informed of the project and provide them with complete confidentiality and comfort for the duration of the interview. As trauma is a sensitive topic, participants will be allowed to answer as much or as little as they see fit. I will also empower the participants to skip difficult questions if necessary. The interview questions will be finalized by the second week of the project. Questions generally will ask participants about various aspects of their identity, noting the intersections that might be at play in their experience, whether they have encountered pathologizing stigma on their queer identity, how this plays into their understanding of their own identity, whether they have ever had any experiences with another queer individual where they were able to bond with them quickly over a shared traumatic experience and many more. Social desirability bias will not be a significant issue as the interview will focus on the participants' lived experiences. My position as a researcher will be inherently biased because of my existence as a queer individual who has fallen victim to trauma. Being a part of the traumatized collective allows me a nuanced view of the various powers that change our perception of the world. To fully maintain their humanity, I will also not surround my participants' identities solely on their experiences with trauma.

I will spend the first week of the project looking at previous research and writing on the existing understanding of queer collective trauma. I will also start reaching out to individuals to gain participants. I will also begin finalizing my interview questions, finishing early in the second week to prepare for interviews. The second week will be spent conducting interviews, collecting data from each one, and organizing them. The third week will be spent finishing up interviews and finalizing all the data collected from the interviews. The fourth week will be spent building my final project with the previous research and the lived experiences of a few queer individuals.

As interviews will be conducted over Zoom, recordings, and transcripts will be produced through its features. Thematic codes will be created to identify similarities in interview answers between participants. Information from the interviews will be coded and organized into their specific themes. Inductive coding will primarily be used to identify themes as they emerge from the interviews. A small amount of pre-determined themes will be used to group demographic data.

Benefits

Through this research, the complex nature of trauma and how it manifests itself through queer communities will be better understood. Queer trauma is produced through the adoption of systems of power like heterosexism by the public. By better understanding the way existing trauma navigates its way through queer communities, we can better combat hegemonic power structures that persist in our society. This research will also give an insight into the way queer trauma as a collective can be used as a tool to strengthen bonds. This allows new ways for trauma to be studied as a tool for betterment rather than an unfavorable aftermath. This opens the door for research on queer trauma to give the agency to queer communities to discuss their experiences with trauma. Future research could complete a more extensive longitudinal study to track how the sense of collective trauma impacts relationships across life stages. Future research could also focus on the effect of intersectional trauma on building relationships, allowing a more nuanced view of how identities intersect to produce a unique understanding of the world.

References

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- Robinson, B. A., Mu, F., Webb, J. M., & Stone, A. L. (2024). Intersectional social support: Gender, race, and LGBTQ youth friendships. *Society and Mental Health*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21568693241266960>