

Arts-based methods as a trauma-informed approach to research: Making trauma visible and limiting harm

Jenny McMahon^{a,*}, Kerry R. McGannon^b, Chris Zehntner^c

^a Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Australia

^b School of Kinesiology and Health Sciences, Laurentian University, Canada

^c Academic Affairs, University of Southern Queensland, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Trauma has become a global health epidemic which means that researching the experiences of those impacted is central to qualitative researchers' work. Subsequently, people affected by trauma may require support during the research process. In this paper, we outline how arts-based autoethnography and the methods of poetry, digital mixed media and drawing align with aspects of an evidence-based trauma-informed framework, highlighting their value when conducting qualitative trauma research. Examples of arts-based representations centring on Author 1's experiences of moving from 'abuse victim' to 'abuse prevention advocate' will show its application and potential benefits for conducting research with other trauma survivors/victims.

Introduction

A growing number of researchers have recognised that the formal implementation of evidence-based trauma-informed practices within research settings and researcher practice is lacking (Hira et al., 2023; McMahon & McGannon, 2024a). This is concerning given trauma is now recognised as a global health epidemic, affecting people from various backgrounds and cultural groups (Emsley et al., 2022; Menschner and Maul, 2016). Trauma has been shown to have detrimental consequences, impacting people in both the short and long-term (Emsley et al., 2022; Menschner and Maul, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014; 2023). Examples of adverse events that can lead to trauma can include exposure to abuse or witnessing of abuse; having a family member with a mental health or substance use disorder; systemic discrimination; traumatic injury; death; natural disasters; hospitalisation; incarceration; terrorism; war; bullying; racial discrimination/violence and poverty (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023).

Investigating the lived experiences of people who have suffered from, or continue to suffer from trauma has become central to research work conducted across sociology, psychology, sport, health, and education contexts (e.g., Hira et al., 2023; McMahon and McGannon, 2021; Moola and Krahn, 2016; Owton and Sparkes, 2017; Papaloukas et al., 2017; Quarmby et al., 2022; Van Ingen, 2020). Due to the prevalence of trauma, and its subsequent detrimental effects (e.g., anxiety, depression,

eating disorders, alcohol/drug addiction), there is an urgent need for researchers to understand trauma and its impact, and furthermore consider the implementation of trauma-informed practices into research processes (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Such an awareness is needed because the impact of trauma on a person can be insidious and their coping resources may be impacted (SAMHSA, 2023). Furthermore, the risk of re-traumatisation for people impacted by trauma is high without the appropriate care and consideration (Dye, 2018; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). When comparing re-traumatisation risks outlined by trauma researchers to commonly taken up qualitative research practices, there are concerning alignments (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a). For instance, when a person is required to recall or discuss their lived adverse experiences (e.g., abuse) and trauma, re-traumatisation may result (Butler et al., 2011; Hira et al., 2023; SAMHSA, 2014, 2017, 2023).

In therapeutic contexts outside of research (e.g., mental health therapy, psychology, social work), arts-based methods (ABMs) have been used as a trauma-informed way for people affected to (re)engage with their adverse lived experiences, and limit their risk of re-traumatisation (Golden, 2019; Ripley, 2023; SAMHSA, 2023). ABMs have been acknowledged as a strengths-based approach because people who are trauma-affected are provided with a space to re-engage with their adverse experiences that enables, and prioritises choice, power, and creativity over how, and what they share (Dieterich-Hartwell and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Jennifer.McMahon@utas.edu.au (J. McMahon).

Koch, 2017; Edwards, 2017). Despite ABMs being found to be beneficial for people to re-engage with their adverse experiences in therapeutic contexts (i.e., outside of research), using ABMs as a trauma-informed approach in research contexts, and researcher practice to minimize further harm and limit re-traumatisation risks is still in its infancy. As such, the purpose of this paper is to outline how arts-based autoethnography, and the methods of poetry, digital mixed media, and drawing align with certain principles listed in SAMHSA's evidence-based trauma-informed framework (2014, 2023). To show the potential application and benefits of ABMs, in this paper, the collection and representations of my lived re-traumatisation experiences using ABMs are shown and furthermore, discussion around how these methods are underpinned by trauma-informed principles is centralised (SAMHSA, 2023).

SAMHSA's trauma-informed framework was first created in 2014 and updated in 2023. Co-produced by a working group of specialists, the framework was developed in response to the group analysing the impact of trauma, assessing the work already done on trauma (e.g., research; professional practice knowledge; survivor/victim knowledge) and identifying the processes undertaken by experts who work with people impacted (Baird, 2018; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Centring on a strengths-based approach, the framework is underpinned by six key principles which are recommended to be implemented into policy and practice to minimize re-traumatisation risks and prevent causing further harm (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). These six principles include - *safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer-support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; cultural, historical and gender issues* (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Since its conception, SAMHSA's framework (2014, 2023) has been implemented and adapted in other sectors where trauma work is conducted including "child welfare, education, criminal and juvenile justice, primary health care and the military" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 3). Despite the successful implementation of trauma-informed practices into other non-research related areas, the implementation of these principles into research contexts and researcher practice is still in its infancy, except for the recent work of a handful of scholars (Alessi and Kahn, 2023; Golden, 2022; McMahon & McGannon, 2024a). Therefore, relating to [qualitative] research practice specifically, there is an inherent need for researchers working with populations affected by trauma to ensure "safe, choice-based research spaces" so potential further harm (e.g., re-traumatisation) is limited (Hira et al., 2023, p. 9; McMahon et al., 2023; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Without the consideration of evidence-based trauma-informed guidelines in research settings, the adoption of 'standard' research practices, may cause people impacted by trauma further harm (Hira et al., 2023).

Arts-based autoethnography – making 'my' (re) traumatisation visible

Relating to my own self-study, when considering the appropriate methodology to detail my (re)traumatisation experiences, which occurred when I moved from 'abuse victim' to 'abuse prevention advocate,' I did not want to be restricted to one mode of representation, such as storytelling, or be constrained by a set of interview questions. Simply speaking, I did not want to be bound to one way of sharing my experiences, particularly as some of my experiences, such as self-harm, I found difficult to 'put' into a written story form with a beginning, middle and ending. The paralysis that I experienced when attempting to 'force' my (re)traumatisation experiences into a story was something that I had not experienced previously when conducting self-research. The written story had always come naturally to me, so I found my story-writing paralysis confronting. Below, I outline how the re-traumatisation that I was experiencing came to block my storytelling voice, while my poetic voice remained intact.

When words evade

*Body hurting
Mind in disarray
Heart palpitating
Fear present.*

*Every interview
Every abuse encounter
Appearing as images in my mind
Swirling, repeating, vivid
Sounds and voices replaying
Am sitting in the front row seat with my trauma on replay
With my pain as the main event.*

*Unable to work
Unable to eat
Unable to sleep
Alcohol numbs
Scratching controls.*

*Want to share
Academic writing conventions paralyse
Crippling me
Deterring me
Silencing me.*

*Words evade
Images and metaphors remaining repetitive and vivid
Those, I prefer to share instead
But will they be viewed as less
My trauma seen as less
With my research judged as less.*

My moving from 'abuse victim' to 'abuse prevention advocate' set me far back in my recovery as I detail further below, causing me to abuse alcohol and prescription medication again, something I had not done for nearly a decade. In addition to this, I fell back into self-harming as a coping mechanism. Therefore, as my trauma recovery was complex, and not linear in terms of how I have experienced it, I sought alternate ways to detail my pain using accessible 'data' forms so others (i.e., audience) could potentially better understand it and witnessing (i.e. a shared responsibility for what is heard) may result (Davies, 2018; Holman Jones and Adams, 2023; Ropers-Huilman, 1999). As such, I found arts-based autoethnography to be most suitable because it aligned with these considerations and further enabled the inclusion and emphasis of my lived experiences using alternate modes of creative representation, rather than solely relying on the 'storytelling' word.

Arts-based research encompasses a range of research approaches and strategies that utilize one or more of the arts in an investigation. As Greenwood (2019) explains, "arts-based research is an umbrella term that covers an eclectic array of methodological and epistemological approaches" (p. 6). While the methodological approach used in this paper is [arts-based] autoethnography, it indeed falls under the arts-based umbrella. As described by Adams and Holman Jones (2017), it is "an approach to doing and representing social research that uses personal ("auto") experience to create a representation ("graphy") of cultural ("ethno") experiences, social expectations, and shared beliefs, values, and practices" (p. 142). The autoethnographic researcher can make use of various mediums or art-based representations to tell their story or experience – whether it's written in prose, poetically represented, storied, or drawn (Greenwood, 2019). Furthermore, as explained by Hjorth and Sharp (2014), there are many artful practices for doing and representing [auto] ethnography such as visual art, performance, poetry, or drawing. To present my trauma experiences, the ABMs of poetry, drawing and digital mixed media were purposely chosen by me to represent my experiences.

The use of arts-based research can be implemented at different stages

in the research process, such as to collect or create data, interpret, or analyse it, present findings, or a combination of these (Greenwood, 2019). The increased use of arts-based approaches in research has occurred in response to the acknowledgement that life experiences are multi-sensory, multifaceted, and complex (van der Kolk, 2014). To document my (re)traumatisation, ABMs within my autoethnography made visible the invisible aspects of (my) trauma and its detrimental impact. As Greenwood (2019) explains, arts-based research sits in contrast to traditional approaches to research where the verbal, and linearly temporal approaches to knowledge and experience are privileged. Furthermore, as traumatic events are often remembered in visual and auditory ways rather than written words, van der Kolk (2014) highlights the importance of using ABMs, because verbal language, at times, is limiting. In relation to my own acts of self-harm, I found it difficult to 'story' the emotions and inner thoughts that were occurring when I inflicted the cuts onto my body.

Below I contextualise how moving from 'abuse victim' to 'abuse prevention advocate' set me back in my trauma recovery, and how one journalist, and a deluge of swimmers who were abuse survivors contacting me led me to become re-traumatised. Subsequently, 'I' will be used predominantly throughout the manuscript. However, my co-authors (Authors' 2 & 3) also played key roles in my autoethnographic research as will be detailed at various stages throughout the manuscript, therefore an interchange between 'I' and 'we' will also occur.

Moving from abuse victim to survivor advocate

As a former elite swimmer, I was subjected to coaching practices that can be characterised as psychological and non-contact physical abuse throughout my career. At the time, I bought into these practices, perceiving that they would make me a stronger, faster, tougher, and more adaptable as an athlete. It was only in the years that followed that I realised how these practices were detrimental to my wellbeing, as I struggled with anxiety, disordered eating and excessive consumption of prescription medication and alcohol. After being abandoned by the sport when my performance did not meet Olympic medal expectations, I found myself unemployed collecting government benefits due to prioritising my sport over my education. After eight years of financial struggle, I decided to pursue university, completing an undergraduate education degree, before undertaking honours and a PhD, both of which centred on investigating maltreatment in sport.

A couple of years ago, an Olympic swimmer announced via social media that she was pulling out of contention for the Tokyo Olympics because the swim culture (that I was once a part of and had investigated for more than a decade) was in her opinion based on misogyny with coaches' behaviour labelled as perverse. Unsurprisingly, several media outlets sought my opinion and expertise on this topic. Ultimately, what the swimmer had experienced resonated with me. As a lone voice, with the sporting body denying any wrongdoing in the media, the wider public began attacking this swimmer's allegations. I pondered extensively before agreeing to undertake any media interviews. I honestly thought that I would not experience the same abuse from the wider public and media as the young female swimmer was receiving as I too had represented Australia, I had successfully completed an honours dissertation and PhD on this sport culture and had widely published since then. In the many interviews that followed, I ensured I was balanced and factual in what I mentioned, discussing my own experiences, along with what I found in my research. I also mentioned what international research had found and what the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recommends in their consensus statement. I made a point of saying that not all coaches will abuse, but the statistics say that around 60% of athletes will experience neglect and psychological abuse. While I foresaw that the public's reactions would be mixed towards me, what I did not expect was the contact that I received from current and past athletes. Some wrote to me begging for my help, sharing personal

documentation and experiences. Parents contacted me sharing their experiences of reporting that led to nothing. Some athletes, however, went on the attack, recognising the practices that I spoke about in the media as their own coach's methods and accused me of having a vendetta for their coach. Other swimmers criticised me saying the practices that I had labelled as abusive were nothing, and that the sexual abuse that they had experienced was real abuse. Below I use poetry to detail how I felt at this time and the crushing pressure of these voices who continued to bombard me. While I started out strong, the repercussions of becoming an 'advocate' began to become known.

The Second Wave

*70 emails received
Help me, they beg
Hurt me, they tell
Confide in me, they do
Private documents, they share
Overwhelming, Crushing, Traumatizing.*

*Twitter messages full
That's not abuse, one yells
That's what it takes to win
Try being raped at 11, she says
That's real abuse, not what you spread
Her anger and desperation, she directs at me
Yet, I am not her abuser.*

*Twitter responses to news articles
I knew I shouldn't have read
Gold medal cake eater one says
Left wing said by another
Woke fires again
Trust this to come from a Tasmanian
I smell a book deal from another
Disgruntled she is, they say.*

*How do I manage?
So many voices, crushing down on me
Crying for help voices
Angry voices
Scared voices
Supportive voices
Groomed voices
Some against me
Some with me.*

*What did I start?
Broken now
Frozen in bed
Paralysed with fear
Silence I should have kept
Regret I now feel.*

While most journalists were supportive and ethical in their reporting, what I was not expecting was a journalist, one who is recognised for her work with female athletes to discredit me and my research. She reported my research and work as less because my published papers featured only a small number of athletes' voices. She did not acknowledge that I spent months with teams, athletes, and coaches through my ethnographic work. This journalist also twisted my words from interviews, hunted me behind the scenes questioning the ethics of an Instagram study that I had published. I became terrified of her. To me, it felt like she had become one of my abusers. To compound this, one of my valued colleagues supported this journalist by agreeing to do an interview with her soon after she reported my research as less, despite being aware of what this journalist had done to me. This same person and her team then invited her as a keynote speaker to a research event as a voice of authority. All this compounded my re-traumatisation, setting me far back in my recovery as I detail in the poem below. This journalist's actions and

behaviour was a significant factor in my (re)traumatisation and the demise of my mental health as detailed in the poem. Indeed, the need to be trauma-informed should also extend to that of journalists' practices particularly when survivors of abuse are willing to share their stories publicly.

L'assassin de l'écriture

*Your voice, I once respected
Your voice, accoladed and connected, remains unaffected
Your voice, in sport, many continue to seek
Your voice, my colleagues laud without critique.*

*But it was your voice who broadcast my research as less
It was your voice who twisted my words to impress
It was your voice who silenced me, and others wanting to express
It was your voice who highjacked our narratives of distress.*

*Through your voice, you protected the institution who abused
Through your voice, your power you misuse
A victim, a survivor, you continue to harass
By questioning my ethics, you create a morass.*

*While brave, I tried to be
Fearful, I became because of thee
My heart, my body, broken by you
And only now, like them I see you.*

Arts-based autoethnography as a trauma-informed way of researching trauma

Given my precarious emotional state, I was hyper aware not to exacerbate the trauma that I was experiencing by undertaking [self] research in a way that sat uncomfortably with me. While this present study was [self] research, the need for it to be underpinned by evidence-based trauma-informed principles was no less important and is applicable to arts-based research more broadly. In this next section of the paper, we detail how arts-based autoethnography and the methods of poetry, digital mixed media, and drawing align with SAMHSA's (2014, 2023) trauma-informed principles of *safety; empowerment, voice, and choice; peer support and collaboration and mutuality*.

Safety

Given people affected by trauma often see the world as being unsafe, which in turn causes them to be hypersensitive to their safety (Menschner and Maul, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023), the first trauma-informed principle of safety was non-negotiable in terms of how this research was designed and the methods that were undertaken. While the process of gaining ethical approval through university research ethics boards is said to address participant safety (Hira et al., 2023), it often requires a rigid procedural process (i.e., step-by-step method) as well as "more traditional considerations for trauma research (i.e., types of questions being asked, participant recruitment protocols, etc.)" (Hira et al., 2023, p. 9). Consequently, this rigidity and focus on traditional research requirements does not align with the variable and often unpredictable nature of trauma (SAMHSA, 2023).

In therapeutic contexts outside of research, trauma therapists have implemented ABMs as a way for trauma-impacted people to detail their emotions, thoughts, and memories of embodied trauma safely (Malchiodi, 2023; Ripley, 2023). From a safety perspective, the benefits of using ABMs have been foregrounded by Morison et al. (2021), who reported that trauma survivors who used ABMs to detail their adverse experiences had their trauma symptoms (e.g., getting upset easily; disturbed sleep; feeling anxious) reduced. One such reason for this is that ABMs provided people affected by trauma with creative ways to

detail painful feelings because words are often insufficient (Malchiodi, 2023; van der Kolk, 2014).

Using the arts as a form of trauma expression is not only a method of knowing and meaning making, but also a form of communication when words fail to convey the totality of human experience (Malchiodi, 2018). As a means of self-preservation (i.e., self-safety), van der Kolk (2014) explains how people impacted by trauma have become very proficient at developing a general cover story by explaining what happened to them by using minimal words to do so. However, their cover stories generally fail to fully capture the essence of their experience (van der Kolk, 2014). As a survivor of abuse, when having to discuss my own lived experiences, and as a method of self-preservation (i.e., self-safety), I use pre-meditated and well-versed cover stories that prevent me from having to go into any depth. Specifically relating to my trauma and abuse, I have a cover story that I use knowing it will not illicit further questions or invite further conversation from the audience/recipient. I have a cover story that I use which I know will not invite (constructive) criticism. I have a cover story that is short, where I initiate moving onto another topic which has no relation to the experiences. Only those closest to me are privy to the detailed vulnerable 'whole' story and that remains dependent on how I am feeling emotionally on the day. Consequently, by victims/survivors failing to convey the totality of their trauma experiences, it could result in only a partial picture of their trauma story being shown. This is an important notion for researchers to consider in their research design, particularly as traditionally, the discipline of psychology has had a 'poor relation' with qualitative research methods, as they remain a minority endeavour (Chamberlain et al., 2020).

Engaging with ABMs expand expressive options for *safer* disclosure by providing people impacted by trauma with a sense of control over how, and what they express (Malchiodi, 2023). While storytelling for instance also enables participants with control over what they express, such an approach restricts them to one mode of telling where words must ensue. In turn, this can cause further anxiety for some, and impact wellbeing (safety) (Malchiodi, 2023). For me (Author 1), this control over what, and how I expressed was important as I was recalling multiple triggering experiences which occurred over consecutive days and weeks as part of my arts-based autoethnography. I wanted the opportunity to detail my lived experiences in a visual layered way without having to document every single incident and occurrence bound by academic writing conventions. Gildea (2021), who used ABMs to depict the childhood sexual violence that she was subjected to, explained how writing her experiences to conventional standards would have been harmful, and greatly disrespectful to her child self, who survived years and years of abuse. For me, the thought of having to relive my trauma and re-traumatisation in a storied way was something I would have had to forcibly subject myself to, causing me great anxiety and jeopardising my emotional/psychological safety.

Also relating to safety, Prendergast (2009) explains how expressing traumatic lived experiences in a condensed manner such as through poetry or visually (e.g., digital mixed media, drawing), rather than documenting each incident separately such as in a detailed storied approach with a beginning, middle and ending (e.g., story) may be less re-traumatising. While qualitative researchers have shown that trauma-affected people's research participation can be beneficial and strengthen resilience (Jaffe et al., 2015), sharing experiences by using story-based methods should not be viewed as a panacea without risks and critical awareness of trauma histories (McGannon and McMahon, 2024). While story-telling methods have been found to be emancipatory in the research sense (McMahon and Penney, 2011), given the unpredictable nature of trauma, researchers cannot discount that while storied approaches may create immediate clarity and emancipatory benefits, they could also be triggering and re-traumatising in the weeks that follow their research participation particularly as trauma is unpredictable (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a).

For me, the ABMs of poetry, digital mixed media and drawing were

purposeful choices as they acted as discreet and small creative containers (Prendergast, 2009) to transfer my difficult feelings and lived experiences into a form that felt manageable, accessible, and safe. It was at this point in my trauma recovery, that drawing (see Fig. 2, and mixed media art (see Fig. 1) reduced privileging my spoken word, particularly as I was not comfortable with expressing my intersecting identities, trauma history (e.g., self-harm), and experiences in colonized ways of knowing (Forsyth et al., 2023; McGannon and McMahon, 2024). As explained by Malchiodi (2018), ABMs have been shown to expand survivors' language limits by creatively detailing experiences which cannot be communicated or completely expressed through words (Malchiodi, 2018). In this respect, ABMs within my autoethnography provided me with a pathway of exploration and description that other methods could not do at the time (Leavy, 2015). Below, in Fig. 2, I present a drawing of my (re)traumatisation which resulted in me self-harming. In the midst of the trauma that I was experiencing, I felt that having to write about the scratches that I inflicted on my body, when at I was at rock bottom, into a form that was storied was more confronting and triggering for me than having to draw them. Therefore, drawing my self-harm provided me with a safe space to document this experience without causing further harm or angst.

Barone and Eisner (2012) have described how ABM have shed new light on hidden and previously unspoken concepts. Relating to my own experiences, if I was required to use 'actual' words to detail my self-harm, I would have likely played it down, hiding intricate detail, to avoid potential judgement from the audience. For me, drawing was a device that assisted me to convey my experiences, but also acted as a buffer as it protected me from having to story it (e.g., The audience can see it, but I don't have to say it). Holman Jones and Adams (2023) explain how ABMs assist in *showing* complex vulnerable experiences that may be perceived as 'taboo', into something which is more manageable for the teller, but can still be visually accessed and understood by the

audience. In turn, drawing assisted, to bring my visual and visceral lived experience of self-harm to life, with the hope of evoking empathy, and alternative ways of viewing my trauma (Barone and Eisner, 1997).

Likewise, the digital mixed media art piece that I created entitled; 'The media onslaught' (see Fig. 1) is a condensed visual representation that encapsulated weeks of painful experiences. This piece was a multi-layered artwork where I was able to show multiple incidents visually in a discreet and small creative container (Prendergast, 2009). Indeed, this discreet and small creative container features my 15-year-old [abused] athlete-self, weeks of media interviews that I undertook as an adult woman working as an 'abuse prevention advocate' in 2021, along with the consequence of these interviews by using a combination of different mixed media (e.g., collage, drawing, digital word art) and materials (e.g., photographs, digital media sources, pencil drawing). By doing this, I attempted to show the complexity and depth of my experiences by creating a background which was layered with all the words that I was "quoted" in published media articles, along with news headlines which reported my 'abuse prevention advocate' stance. This digital collage background featured snippets from 14 selected online news sources which I featured in. Then I was able to overlay this digital collage with a photographic image of myself (self-taken). I digitally removed my adult eyes and inserted my 15-year-old eyes (taken from a photograph of me during my adolescence) to symbolise the abuse that I witnessed and experienced at that age, which I subsequently spoke about in these media interviews. As a way of signposting the inclusion of my 15-year-old eyes in this art piece to the audience, I digitally added frayed edges to the picture to show that the eyes were torn from an older photograph. I also inserted and digitally transformed a hand drawn tear that I had created to symbolise the pain and hurt that resulted from becoming an 'advocate'. There were many tears in the days and weeks of me revisiting my own, along with other swimmers' abuse stories publicly which led me to regret my advocate stance. As such, I digitally removed my mouth to show my regret at speaking out about abuse and provided a heading using different sized digital word art in alternate colours and fonts to highlight these feelings to the reader/audience. ABMs became a beneficial way for me to communicate and interpret my own reality, through the development of my own "visual language and artistry" (Schon, 1987, p. 13) thus broadening the way my trauma information was conveyed and potentially understood (Holman Jones and Adams, 2023).

Empowerment, voice, and choice

It has been widely established that people impacted by trauma have had their voices silenced or suppressed as well as their individual agency, choice and control taken from them (Delker et al., 2020; McMahon et al., 2023; National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors [NAMSMHPD], 2022). To avoid replication of inequitable power differentials and the suppression of victim/survivor voice and choice in and through the researcher and participant relationship (e.g., researcher/academic voice prioritised over survivor voice; the researcher is the only decision maker), the TIP of *empowerment, voice, and choice* (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023) is imperative in research design and researcher practice when undertaking trauma research. Only when this is addressed, is the interplay of power dynamics and survivor vulnerability considered because when decisions are made *about you – without you*, they can cause further harm (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). To be trauma-informed, researchers need to operate from a strengths-based approach, to promote *self-determined* recovery from trauma, even in the research process (Darroch et al., 2022; Edelman, 2023). While (arts-based) autoethnography enabled me (Author 1) as both the researcher and participant to have *control and choice* over all aspects of my trauma (self) research, ABMs more broadly must be acknowledged as a participant-driven method of data elicitation (Leavy, 2018) which enables survivors with *choice and power* over how and what they share. The Blue Knot Foundation (2020), who developed guidelines for

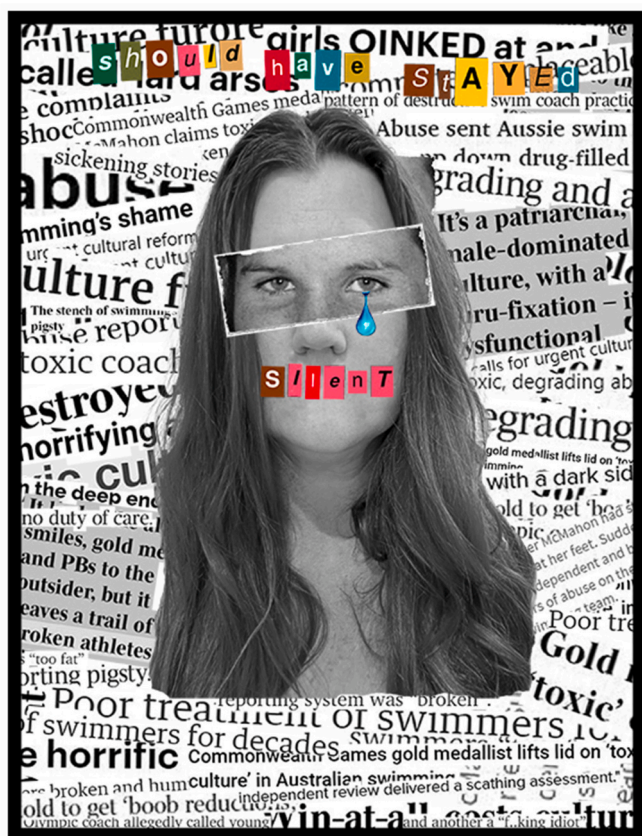


Fig. 1. The media onslaught, [digital mixed media].



Fig. 2. Foetal, [pencil on paper].

organizations working with people affected by trauma have similarly highlighted the need for trauma survivors to be provided with *choice*, options, and self-determination¹ at all levels with which they are involved. While ABMs specifically were not mentioned, Smith et al. (2023) explains how this stance can be achieved in research through co-production, whereby participants (i.e., victims/survivors) can draw upon their experiences to meaningfully inform, influence, or lead the direction of research projects. Relating to ABMs specifically, victims/survivors can become active collaborators in and through trauma research by using self-determined ABMs to detail their experiences in visual ways, rather than being “subjects” of research that utilize methods decided by researchers/others. Jeffery et al. (2019) explains how using ABMs, participants (i.e., survivors/victims) can develop their creative skills to authentically contribute to the research process by actively participating “in the production of knowledge and disclose experiences that might otherwise remain concealed due to lack of an appropriate ‘safe space’ for disclosure” (p. 6).

Relating to detailing my own trauma, arts-based autoethnography, as well as ABMs more broadly provided me as a victim/survivor of abuse with *agency* (i.e., *voice*) and *choice* over how I wanted to best represent my lived experiences. A storied approach will naturally be infused with misrecognised or subconscious cultural narratives, and by limiting ourselves to this approach we incur the risk of recycling and reinforcing such cultural norms, thus limiting our ability to communicate the impact of trauma. Through an arts-based approach, I capitalised on my limited artistic abilities (i.e., strengths-based approach) relating to the specific ways I chose to represent (my) trauma and as a way of knowing (Leavy, 2018). Through a strengths-based approach, *agency*, and *choice*, I found poetry, a creative literary arts method to make the invisible world of my trauma visible (Parini, 2008) into a creative textual condensed form. Yurkovich (2022) explains how poetry provides individuals with creative control over the expression of their emotions, improving understanding of certain events or traumatic experiences, allowing for resolution and clarification.

The poems included in the manuscript entitled; ‘*When words evade*’ and ‘*The second wave*’ (above) are free verse styles of poetry which were unrestrictive (e.g., no meter and rhythm rules), thus enabling me to express my experiences freely without being pressured to conform to a certain pattern form, grammar, or linearity rules (Gildea, 2021; McMahon & McGannon, 2024b). Yurkovich (2022) explains how free verse poetry provides trauma victims/survivors with “freedom from hegemonic prescriptions about writing and expression”, instead being “a reclamation of power through the acceptance and illustration of personal expression” (p. 109). While not having to conform to writing

restrictions/rules was key to these two poems, my poem entitled, ‘*L’assassin de l’écriture*’ did use some purposeful rhyming techniques. For me, the rhyming of certain words within each stanza emphasised different lived trauma events at different times and the consequences that resulted for me. Like Faulkner (2017) explains, such intentional use of words, albeit rhyming “is to stress moments of subjective feeling and emotion in a short space, “to represent actual experiences—episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, pleasures—capturing those experiences in such a way that others can experience and feel them” (p. 218). Despite there being some rules relating to the rhyming I engaged with (e.g., making the last word in a line, rhyme with the last word in the next line), my choice of this style of poem still demonstrates *my* self-determination over how this particular trauma experience was shared with others.

My active choice making, and self-determination over how my trauma experiences were shared with the audience ensured my participation was *empowering* (through my sole decision making), rather than *disempowering*. Alessi and Kahn (2023) explain how re-traumatisation can be limited by actively enabling participants to set their own boundaries regarding what they wish to disclose and how they wish to share it (e.g., method) (Alessi and Kahn, 2023; McMahon & McGannon, 2024b). For Malchiodi (2014), who is a trauma therapist and researcher, one lesson that she learned from decades of work with people, is how empowering the use of the arts have become in expressing one’s experience when words cannot. In this respect, ABMs may empower abuse survivors to capitalise on their individual creative strengths so their experiences can be shared with others (SAMHSA, 2015).

Collaboration and mutuality

SAMHSA (2014) explains how the principle of *collaboration and mutuality* involves the levelling of power relations between parties. Typically, the methodology of autoethnography centres on the researcher taking on the role of both researcher and participant. Therefore, the levelling of power relations which this principle centres on is not generally required. However, as a neophyte artist, this principle related to my collaboration with others (e.g., my son, Authors 2/3), particularly in relation to my art generation. While arts-based researchers or using ABMs do not require people to have ‘special creative skills’ as such, Leavy (2017) recommends that to ‘think like an artist,’ you may consider working with, and learning from, people who have mastered an arts-based craft. Instead of collaborating with a stranger who had art expertise who could assist me in crafting my trauma/abuse experiences creatively, given I was wanting to share distressing topics such as self-harm, I purposely chose to collaborate with both my adult son, a professional artist studying creative arts at university, along with my partner (Author 3) who has extensive experience using digital art programs. Both my son and partner had consequently lived with me

¹ Self-determination centres on a person’s right to determine their own life and make their own choices.

through my trauma and possessed ‘insider’ knowledge of my experience that others are not privy too. SAMHSA (2014, 2023) explains the importance of receiving support from those trusted within a survivor’s inner most circle and is recognised as the first line of defence to aid with recovery and prevent further harm. In terms of the arts-based data that I generated, both my son and my partner were able to show me different techniques and programs (e.g., shading, photoshop) which I needed to master to create specific mood(s) when communicating my trauma experiences. For instance, relating to my drawing (Fig. 2 above), my son showed me how to add different grades of shading to give my body a three-dimensional look (McMahon and McGannon, 2024b). He also encouraged me to add just one colour to emphasise a particular traumatic point to the audience. For me, I wanted to emphasise my self-inflicted scratches to the audience to show my trauma and I did this with the use of the colour red.

Relating to the digital mixed media art piece that was created (see Fig. 1), and to master the manipulation, creative editing and compilation of it, Author 3 and I undertook smaller practise artefacts, using Adobe Photoshop™. Author 3 sat with me during this process and offered ideas that extended the capability of the application. When I had mastered the basic skills as well as some more advanced effects like ‘torn edges,’ I set about combining selected artefacts to produce the final piece. While I had a very clear idea in my head about how the final art piece would look, my partner would occasionally query why I omitted some items, and why I made others more prominent. This dialogue was mostly practical in nature (i.e., could the application help achieve a particular process) and ultimately the artistic decision making was left to me.

Peer support

The principle of peer support (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023) is imperative when undertaking trauma work. It involves working alongside individuals with lived trauma experiences, so the process is not isolating for them (Menschner and Maul, 2016). Centring on their similar [trauma] experiences and shared understanding, trust ensues along with a willingness to share detailed experiences (Menschner & Maul, 2016). Given autoethnographic research work can be isolating, peer support helped me to overcome the potential isolation associated with this approach. Specifically, in the case of my arts-based autoethnography, Author 2 who has lived experience of some types of abuse as well as trauma undertook this peer support role. Even though I chose to share my trauma experiences by using arts-based autoethnography using representations that I chose, Author 2 was integral to this process as we undertook a ‘friendship as method’ process. Alongside my adult son and partner (Author 3), Author 2 was “somebody to talk to, depend on, rely on for help and support and was caring” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 271). Equally, I (friend/co-author) also held that role for Author 2 when she shared similar abuse experiences to those which featured creatively in this paper, so the process was two-way (McMahon and McGannon, 2024b). The ‘friendship as method²’ was undertaken by us through messaging services, where I would share progress of my drawings and poems. In turn, Author 2 provided positive encouragement, reactions, and probed how detailing my trauma was impacting me. Through ‘friendship as method,’ Author 2 gently probed about the creative details that I had included or excluded, drawing on her own experiences as a survivor as she did this. I found ‘friendship as method’ to be safer for me in the construction of my creative representations, rather than Author 2 undertaking a critical friend role which deeply concerned me (McMahon and McGannon, 2024b). While the critical friend process opens constructive dialogue, I found the idea of ‘constructive feedback’ profoundly confronting (McMahon and McGannon, 2024b). Trauma

researchers (e.g., Delker et al., 2020; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023) explain how people with reported histories of trauma and abuse may have a fragile self-esteem and in turn, they may suffer from extreme sensitivity to criticism (McMahon and McGannon, 2024b). For me, the collaboration and peer support that I received from Author 2, Author 3, and my adult son, enabled me as a survivor to learn from this experience. While autoethnography is usually a solo endeavour, this collaboration created a community of support for me within this research process. As explained by SAMHSA (2014, 2023), there is recognition that healing may happen in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision making.

Limitations

While I used arts-based autoethnography to detail my trauma experiences in a safe and empowering way in this paper, there are several limitations related to the use of arts-based research (ABR). First, as outlined by Elliot (2024), conventional approaches to research (e.g., surveys, focus groups, interviews) have been privileged or valued over ABR and ABMs, as they are seen to bring about sustainable and efficacious change which is central to research impact. Aligning with this point is that many traditional academic requirements are associated with producing research which hierarchizes certain ways of knowing such as post-positivism (Boydell et al., 2012; Coemans and Hannes, 2017; Elliot, 2024). Consequently, researchers using ABR may struggle to include their creative data within the conventions of many journals and dissertations (Boydell et al., 2012). Coupled with this limitation is that academic yearly performance reviews, and reviews for academic promotion are primarily based on publication outputs (Coemans and Hannes, 2017). Given academic audit cultures, and taken for granted ways of producing knowledge, the restrictions or limitations of journals, researchers using ABR, or wanting to use ABR, may be deterred from taking up this approach (Coemans and Hannes, 2017). Aligning with this point, is that funding bodies may value traditional modes of research (i.e., semi-structured interviews, post-positivism) over ABR, resulting in fewer funding opportunities for researchers using this approach (Coemans and Hannes, 2017).

The use of ABMs is foregrounded in this paper as a safe option for me (Author 1) to detail my trauma experiences of self-harm, anxiety, depression, and fear, using a strength-based approach and coinciding with evidence-based trauma-informed principles. However, there are inherent issues and risks associated with using ABMs. Coemans and Hannes (2017) noted that creatively representing unpleasant experiences can trigger harmful consequences such as anxiety, nightmares and trouble sleeping (Coemans and Hannes, 2017). While there are risks that unpleasant feelings can be triggered when using ABMs, the same may occur when using written forms or storied data which have been shown to carry similar emotional risks (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Emerald and Carpenter, 2015). Finally, while I produced my own arts representations as part of this [arts-based] autoethnography research, ABR pieces generated by participants may see an issue with respect to ownership of ‘data’ (Coemans and Hannes, 2017). Simply speaking, when participants produce art to be used as data in research, their input or creation of data potentially should be acknowledged through co-authorship (Coemans and Hannes, 2017). A caveat associated with this recommendation, however, is the risk with exposing participants’ identity if authorship is acknowledged, which may compromise their psychological and physical safety in cases of trauma work (Coemans and Hannes, 2017). Participants involved in ABR, who are acknowledged by researchers through co-authorship for their artistic contributions should be made aware in the consent stage that confidentiality of their participation will not be maintained, as per the guidelines outlined in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023).

² ‘Friendship as method,’ involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship when undertaking research (Tillmann, 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have responded to the lack of formal implementation of evidence-based trauma-informed practices within qualitative research settings and researcher practice by detailing how ABMs are a trauma-informed, and safe way for victims/survivors to (re)engage with their adverse lived experiences. This is important to trauma research more broadly because as SAMHSA (2014; 2023) warns, trauma can have short and long-term detrimental effects. Indeed, when people with a history of trauma enter a space, such as a research context, they are at risk of re-traumatisation particularly when they are required to recall or relive their [adverse] experiences. ABMs have been acknowledged as trauma-informed, and successfully implemented into therapeutic contexts outside of research (e.g., mental health therapy, psychology, social work). Relating to research settings and researcher practice specifically, ABMs have not been foregrounded as being a trauma-informed way of conducting research with people who are trauma-affected, or as a way of limiting further harm and minimizing re-traumatisation risks. This paper shows how ABMs can be a trauma-informed and safe way for survivors/victims to engage with their adverse lived experiences and further, we have outlined how creative representations open up the way that trauma information is shared with the audience (Holman Jones and Adams, 2023). For me, being impacted by trauma is an invisible experience, and ABMs made visible my experiences that had been hidden to outsiders. The success of ABMs sits in its capacity to offer creative means to lived trauma experiences. Instead of relying on words to portray experiences, trauma-impacted people can exercise self-determination and choice over their self-representations. This in turn can enhance safer disclosure, cultural adaptability/relevance as well as broadening the ways that trauma information is presented through creative means. ABMs enrich the understanding of trauma information as it assists survivors/victims to “communicate and interpret their own reality, through the development of their own visual language and artistry” (Schon, 1987, p. 13). Additionally, ABMs broaden the understanding of, and ways in which trauma information is presented (Holman Jones and Adams, 2023). While the six trauma-informed principles produced by SAMHSA (2014, 2023) are quite broad, and potentially could be engaged with in a simplistic or tick-box manner, we have shown how ABMs can align with some of these principles in an authentic and rigorous ways.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jenny McMahon: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kerry R. McGannon:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Chris Zehntner:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2024.100141>.

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