

Workplace Trauma in Professional Kitchens: Experiences of Part-time Undergraduate Culinary Arts Students in Ireland

Orla Mc Connell¹ and Gillian Larkin²

^{1,2}Technological University Dublin

Abstract

As the hospitality industry continues to struggle with attracting and retaining employees, chefs in particular, research on culture in kitchens continues to grow. A recent report in Ireland exposed a culture of bullying and harassment of employees in the hospitality sector. Internationally, researchers have explored the complexity of navigating, belonging, and coping in professional kitchens and have subsequently identified how trauma is embedded in the practice of cooking and serving food. The research to date has largely focused on the perspectives of cooks, and chefs, particularly those who work in elite restaurants, so little is known about the student experience. Part-time students can offer valuable insights as they have experiences both in their working world and in higher education. The focus of this paper is to highlight recent findings of ongoing doctoral research on professionalism in culinary arts. In-depth semi-structured interviews took place with ten participants. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) informed the research approach and was used in the analysis of the data. Although the research sought to address a gap in the professionalism literature, by seeking participants who were part-time culinary arts degree students whilst working in industry, an experiential theme on trauma emerged. Several participants shared their experiences of working in professional kitchens revealing negative cultures and environments. In this regard, the research adds to the discussion by confirming that workplace trauma is evidenced across the sector. It further highlights the need for a change in culture to attract future generations to the profession.

Keywords

Workplace trauma; professional kitchens; bullying and harassment; part-time culinary arts students; chefs; interpretative phenomenological analysis

An audience exists with an avid appetite for dramatic portrayals of chefs in popular culture. These depictions fall somewhere on a continuum between the reality and fantasy of a professional kitchen. Hungry viewers are fed a concoction of Nigella Lawson's soothing "comfort watching" (Craig 2020, para. 4), and the manic pseudo-reality of Gordon Ramsay in *The F Word* (Leer 2016, 78). When watching the first series of *The Bear*, Murphy (2023) aptly described it: "For anyone who has worked in

busy restaurants, much of that tension will bring back PTSD-like nightmares [...]” (para. 3). The author argued how the experience of working in professional kitchens probably lies somewhere between these somewhat sanitised and overly dramatised interpretations (2023, para. 10).

Whether grounded in fact or fiction, mass media highlights the highs and lows of the profession including trauma associated with the job. According to Hui (2022), *Boiling Point* divided some chefs on its portrayal of the professional kitchen. While one chef said it “so magnificently captured the feeling of what it’s like to work in a terrible kitchen” (2022, para. 11), others said it was potentially damaging to the industry (para. 2); an industry which struggles with, and needs to be more proactive in, attracting (Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons 2007, 33; Mack 2012, 122; Wellton 2017, 13) and retaining talent (Bloisi and Hoel 2008, 655).

Aside from the public sphere, researchers in business, hospitality and tourism, psychology, sociology, and culinary arts have also felt drawn to the professional kitchen. Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons (2007), Bloisi and Hoel (2008), Meiser and Pantumsinchai (2022), and Meiser and Wilson (2023) have examined bullying, occupational stress, and violence experienced by chefs and cooks. Elite chefs have received much attention including the construction of identity and belonging (Palmer, Cooper, and Burns 2010; Cooper, Giousmpasoglou, and Marinakou 2017), and the occupational socialisation of young chefs (Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper 2018). While Gill and Burrow (2018) uncovered the role of fear in the kitchen, recent research in Ireland highlighted how the perpetrators of bullying include not only chefs, but owners, managers, and supervisors (Curran 2021, 16). Palmer, Cooper, and Burns (2010, 311) called on researchers to include the wider chef community, not just the elite, which Gough and Mac Con Iomaire (2022) addressed by exploring migrant chefs in Paris, who experienced challenges of integration and assimilation. Furthermore, the role of suffering in identity formation, and the relationship between organisational isolation and misbehaviour have drawn interest (Burrow, Scott, and Courpasson 2022a; 2022b). Alcohol and drug use in elite kitchens (Giousmpasoglou, Brown, and Cooper 2018), and the issue of gender for female chefs (Harris and Giuffre 2015; Kurnaz, Kurtuluş, and Kılıç 2018; Albors Garrigos *et al.* 2020; Farrell 2020) have been explored. While the perspectives and experiences of cooks and chefs are captured in this literature, the contribution of culinary arts students is underexplored.

A review of the literature will reveal how workplace trauma – stress, fear, bullying, and violence – is deeply embedded in kitchen culture, which is linked to competition, insecurity, and fear. Alongside this research, on the impact of unprofessional attitudes and behaviours, are other studies, which have contributed to the understanding of what it means to be a professional chef (Fine 1996; Pratten 2003; Zopiatis 2010; Allen and Mac Con Iomaire 2016; Allen and Mac Con Iomaire 2017; Mc Connell 2023), and what professionalism means to chefs and culinary arts educators (Mack 2012; Roosipõld and Loogma 2014; Wellton, Jonsson, and

Svingstedt 2018). Professionalism is considered an important success factor for chefs in Ireland (Allen and Mac Con Iomaire 2017, 216; Farrell 2020, 234), and more recent research confirmed that culinary arts students in the United Kingdom concur (Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou 2022). Gaining a deeper understanding of professionalism may help to change kitchen culture for the better (Giousmpasoglou, Brown, and Cooper 2018, 64).

The findings presented in this paper are part of ongoing doctoral research on professionalism. The participants in this research were part-time undergraduate degree students, who were also working in the industry. While the aim of the research was to explore what experiences have contributed to their sense of professionalism, the participants spoke about enduring workplace trauma when interviewed. First, the paper introduces the topic of trauma in general, before exploring the terms associated with workplace trauma. An overview of the literature relevant to the chef's profession will be discussed. Second, the methodology used in this research on professionalism in culinary arts will be outlined. The paper concludes with the analysis of and discussion on workplace trauma experienced by the participants. Evidence suggests that workplace trauma, in its many guises, causes frustration and creates barriers to the development of professionalism.

Literature Review

An Introduction to the Concept of Trauma

The word trauma stems from the ancient Greek for “wound” (Kolaitis and Olff 2017, 1), and remains in use within medical facilities worldwide to describe physical injuries. Since the 1860s, it has also been used to describe psychological harm, for example, resulting from railway or industrial accidents, which presented psychologically, not physically, weeks or months later (Snyder 2009, 36). Trauma was further explored, as a psychological issue, when men were diagnosed with “shell shock” (Mosse 2000) and “combat fatigue” (Shephard 2001) because of war. Furthermore, a case for traumatised women as victims of domestic or sexualised violence was made by women's rights movement (Griffiths 2018).

In 1980, the term “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) appeared in the third edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association 2013), and later was typified by “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (271). A broader view of trauma offered is “a sudden and forceful event that overwhelms a person's ability to respond to it, recognizing that a trauma need not involve actual physical harm to oneself; an event can be traumatic if it contradicts one's worldview and overpowers one's ability to cope” (Horowitz 1989, cited in Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2014, para. 4). “Large-T” trauma refers to events such as natural disasters or mass violence, and “micro-Traumas” encompass issues such as discrimination and bullying in the

workplace, which can cause “psychic pain and life-long damage” (Straussner and Calnan 2014, 324).

Utilising a sociological imagination, Alexander (2004) argues it is not events that are traumatic, but how they are constructed by society. An organisation is like a mini society – “a world with social structure and culture” – comprised of members who depend on and work together (Fine 1996, 112). These societies can be embedded in symbolic power, which Bourdieu (1991, 23) described as “a kind of *active complicity* on the part of those subjected to it,” wherein “dominated individuals are not passive bodies to which symbolic power is applied, as it were, like a scalpel to a corpse.” Bourdieu (1991, 242) identified the word “doxa” to mean the unstated, taken-for-granted assumptions or “common sense” way of working and understanding, which allows certain behaviours and actions to become the norm.

In some workplaces, a toxic environment becomes the norm; such environments are places where bullying, harassment, and discrimination are common (George 2023). Persistent features include top-down decision making, “passive, aggressive, or defensive” communication styles, fear of expressing ones’ true feelings, a lack of autonomy, and adherence to “one right way” of operating, wherein employees are viewed as “material resources” (Baillie, Trygstad, and Cordoni 1989, 58–60). Workplace stress can have a negative effect on organisations and employees in terms of performance and productivity, and morale and motivation (Rasool *et al.* 2020). According to the authors, workplace violence, such as harassment and ostracism, can hinder sustainable work performance, leaving an individual feeling helpless and jeopardising feelings of safety and health (Rasool *et al.* 2020).

Behind Closed Doors of the Professional Kitchen

Traditionally the kitchen was a closed space, which facilitated unprofessional behaviour free from external scrutiny (Graham 2020; Graham, Ali, and Tajeddini 2020; Burrow, Scott, and Courpasson 2022b, 1104). While some kitchens are on public display, historically their inner workings have largely remained behind closed doors. Behind these doors, chefs can find camaraderie and a sense of belonging (Lane 2014, 73; Palmer, Cooper, and Burns 2010, 319; Burrow, Scott, and Courpasson 2022b, 1125), but loyalty is shown by enduring trauma (Palmer, Cooper, and Burns 2010, 322; Cooper 2012, 324–25; Reiner 2019).

Burrow, Scott, and Courpasson (2022b, 1114) proposed that the hidden kitchen has led to the isolation of chefs, where “misbehaviour” (1120) – aggression, bullying, and violence – is normalised within these boundaries. However, many chefs have exposed the harsh reality of the industry to the press (Deegan 2018; Paul 2018; Reiner 2019; Hardgrave 2023), in the hope that the public may begin to care more about the treatment of chefs, which, in turn, could make customers more conscious of where to spend their money (West-Knights 2022). Even with such media attention,

meaningful change remains slow in the industry (Meiser and Pantumsinchai 2022, 13947), and trauma perpetuates in professional kitchens.

Workplace Trauma in the Culinary Profession

From the onset in kitchens, chefs are “hardened” (Bloisi and Hoel 2008, 653) through a process of conditioning. Cooper (2012, 323) described the profession as one of “sacrifice, pain and suffering,” where the chef wears their physical scars as a “symbolic manifestation” of culinary culture. Leer (2016, 78) stated that the abuse administered by Gordon Ramsay to his staff in the TV series *The F Word* “would be unacceptable in other spaces of modern, democratic culture.” Bloisi and Hoel (2008) suggested that workplace trauma appears to be accepted in professional kitchens due to “personal characteristics, culture and socialisation, and the transient nature of the industry.” Lane (2014, 83) suggested such transience is caused by a failure “to feel compensated for the relentless pressure, shortage of personal time, and relatively low pay,” with stress, and poor terms and conditions, contributing to alcohol and substance abuse.

Competition and Fear in the Professional Kitchen

Competition is deeply ingrained in culinary culture (Lane 2014, 114), which inhibits the professional cohesion of practitioners (Fine 1996, 137; Roosipõld and Loogma 2014, 11). Rivalry is part of the “hegemonic ideal,” which is instilled in young chefs to be successful (Burrow, Smith, and Yakinthou 2015, 674). Female chefs experience the “hard, competitive, masculine, hierarchical, and challenging” nature of kitchens (Albors Garrigos *et al.* 2020, 461–62). Chefs endure “psychological pressure” to produce consistent excellence (Lane 2014, 122) in a “volatile industry” (Mack 2012, 198), where competitiveness is “unlike any other” profession (191) and “fraternal in nature” (197), within “an arena with an intense number of competitors” (200). In this highly competitive environment, Ariza-Montes *et al.* (2018, 92) suggested that employers should seek practitioners who “prioritize altruism versus egoism and change versus continuity.”

Fear is a common bullying tactic used in professional kitchens (Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper 2018, 1890) and has been “central to the institution of haute cuisine for decades” (Gill and Burrow 2018, 459). The double-edged nature of fear means that, on one hand, it can be associated with failure causing insecurity and “posturing” (Mack 2012, 181); on the other, it can be motivating and bonding (Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper 2018, 1891), used to learn how to better navigate the professional kitchen (Mac Con Iomaire 2008, 44–45), and drawn upon to improve conformity and precision (Gill and Burrow 2018, 445).

Bullying, Violence, and Harassment

According to Johns and Menzel (1999, 104), bullying, violence, and harassment is shrouded in a myth, which heralds the chef as a creative artist whose unprofessional

behaviour is acceptable. However, this fails to excuse what Mac Con Iomaire (2008, 46) described as the “vicious circle” of bullying, which continues to be “deeply embedded” (Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper 2018, 1882) in the long-established brigade system of “order, authority and control” and used to ensure excellence and consistency delivered under pressure (2018, 1894). A key issue is the blurred line between what is considered harmless banter and “predatory” bullying in kitchens, with one feeding off the other (2018, 1895). According to the authors, both banter and bullying form part of occupational socialisation and are utilised to induct, test, motivate, and bond chefs (2018, 1895). Therefore, bullying is seen as a necessary evil as it can help chefs to function effectively and efficiently within the brigade (Alexander *et al.* 2012, 1253).

Violence is acutely entrenched in (Johns and Menzel 1999, 99), and forms a “core part” of (Meiser and Wilson 2023, 7), kitchen culture. According to Burrow, Scott, and Courpassan (2022a, 10), violence ranged from “subtle” to “extreme,” with “suffering” deeply embedded in chefs’ working lives (2022a, 6). Chefs and cooks cope by avoiding, resisting, and enduring violence (Meiser and Wilson 2023, 8). According to the authors, the most common strategy for those in lower rank positions was enduring violence, whereas avoidance, such as leaving a job, was more common for those of higher status (2023, 18).

While there are many reports of bullying and sexual harassment in relation to gender in kitchens (Cooper 2012, 329; Farrell 2020; Burrow, Scott, and Courpassan 2022a), some female chefs have also admitted to adopting this approach. Angela Hartnett stated that cultural change in kitchens is slow, disclosing that she too was guilty of bullying and aggressive behaviour (Lane 2014, 110). Research by Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper (2018) suggested that young female chefs are subjected to the same “harsh conditions during the induction” as their male equivalents (1882), and that they are expected to “behave” and “survive” in the same manner (1895). Of deep concern is the unprofessional behaviour of young chefs, who, on progressing to more senior roles, opt to perpetuate it rather than learn from the past and make change for the better (Mac Con Iomaire 2008, 46; Mack 2012, 122; Burrow, Smith, and Yakinthou 2015, 674; Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper 2018, 1893–94). This cycle of workplace trauma is enabled by enduring continuity and a lack of critical self-reflection.

Drugs and Alcohol are Part of Kitchen Culture

Giousmpasoglou, Brown, and Cooper (2018, 63–64) revealed that substance use continues to be part of workplace culture in Michelin kitchens in Ireland and the United Kingdom, with drugs and alcohol used to help chefs cope and self-medicate. According to the authors, drinking alcohol not only helped chefs to relax and decompress, but also served “as a group bonding mechanism” (2018, 64), with drugs used to maintain stamina (2018, 64). The authors suggested that the psyche of the chef, and their drive for perfection, may contribute to this abuse.

Professionalism Literature and Components of Workplace Trauma

Fine (1996) attributed a chef's professionalism in part to their ability to detach "from the unpleasant feelings associated with stress" (225). Farrell's (2020, 234) research also found that "the ability to handle stressful situations, good communication skills, professionalism, accountability and integrity" were important characteristics of a chef. Giousmpasoglou, Brown, and Cooper (2018, 64) proposed that a "new-found level of professionalism [...] and an elevation in the status and standing of chefs' may contribute to positive change in the industry. Therefore, exploring the complexity of professionalism to stimulate positive changes in kitchen culture is important.

Positive Change in the Professional Kitchen

While the literature on professional kitchen culture is a disheartening read, it can initiate a conversation on the need for change. Giousmpasoglou, Brown, and Cooper (2018, 64) called for the creation of national and international standards on substance abuse in professional kitchens and highlighted the role of educators to promote positive kitchen culture as part of professionalisation, as well as a need for human resources and senior management to adopt prevention strategies. Farrell (2020, 248) recommended the development of a "code of conduct" to address bullying and harassment, while Bloisi and Hoel (2008, 655) called on educators to equip their students with the skills and knowledge to be a professional and to understand the effect of their behaviour. In Ireland, *Chef Network*, an online platform for chefs, developed their Charter, which was built on five principles to promote a more professional workplace culture (Chef Network n.d.). Graham, Ali, and Tajeddini (2020) proposed that culinary occupational identity is changing with the chef transitioning from the hidden to the open kitchen. According to the authors, increased interaction with customers was cited as a stimulus for cultural change and facilitated a reduction in "abusive aggressive behaviours" (2020, 33).

Methodology

The ongoing doctoral research, which this paper stems from, adopted a phenomenological approach; specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA's origins are in Jonathan Smith's (1996) work. It is an exploratory experiential method, which is often used to uncover the meaning of an underexplored phenomenon, such as professionalism, during a major transition in people's lives (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 1). In this regard, the participants were all pursuing a part-time degree in culinary arts as mature students, whilst working in industry.

Following ethics approval, potential participants – five female and five male, both national and non-national – were sought. In-depth semi-structured interviews were

recorded and transcribed by the researcher. IPA puts emphasis on the individual, therefore each case, or participant, was initially analysed separately. Analysis started with one case. The transcript was read and re-read, noting of initial observations followed, experiential statements were developed, and connections across these statements were sought to reveal personal experiential themes (PETs). Subsequent cases were analysed in the same way. The final step looked for patterns across the participants to uncover group experiential themes (GETs). For readers who are interested in IPA, further detailed explanation is provided by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022). In the next section, experiences shared by the participants related to the GET “The Culture and Environment Can Hinder Professionalism” are presented.

Analysis

The group experiential theme “The Culture and Environment can Hinder Professionalism” highlights the traumatic experiences encountered by the ten participants. Several sub-themes were revealed, such as competitiveness and fear, drug and alcohol use, but only harassment and bullying are presented in this short paper (see Figure 1).

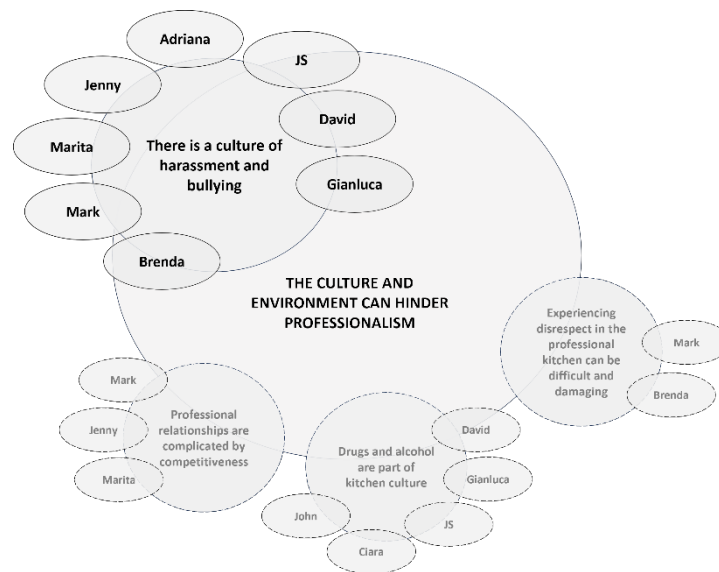


Figure 1: Group Experiential Theme on *The Culture and Environment can Hinder Professionalism* and Sub-themes.

Sub-theme: There is a Culture of Harassment and Bullying in the Professional Kitchen

Several participants spoke of harassment and bullying in the kitchen. JS describes the environment as “horrific,” and Brenda as “toxic.” Verbal abuse and shouting were common experiences, so strategies were required to survive.

For Adriana, this started early in her career, and she immediately recognised the behaviour as unprofessional:

... they used to shout at me, you know, and intimidating me, like scaring me... you have to do this by yesterday [stresses word], like shouting, you know, and I was just, just started working there, you know, was not even my first month... in a career, in a professional kitchen... Yeah, it wasn't pleasant at all, wasn't professional (22-23).

David was also shouted at, with the addition of physical aggression, which made him feel "embarrassed" as he let the "team" down, and the memory of his experience is deeply imprinted:

... it's like a video in my head I can see, it's very, very, vividly, and embarrassed and obviously you don't want to make that mistake again... (12)

...I remember I made a pasta... the place was so, so busy, and I must have forgot to season a pasta, fish, a shrimp pasta dish I remember, and he just gets the pan, and he just threw it at ya and starts shouting and you just like, you're stuck to the ground... (11)

For Mark, it is not just about how you are spoken to, but what is simmering and subtly inferred:

And in a kitchen, there's lots of [pause] underlying topics and that like, like racism and sexism and kinda very negative languages that can be used in kitchens... (30)

Adriana is almost apologetic in thinking her experiences were caused by her gender:

... it was not a pleasant experience... It wasn't a pleasant atmosphere... I don't even want to mention, to me, to mention about the gender, you know, "cause I was the only woman in there, but I was treated different... (22)

Marita also found it challenging being the only "girl" in the kitchen:

And working, when you are girl and working with guys and it's also really quite hard, like I'm also not person that it's pushing... (11)

For Jenny, it was the lack of words that mattered. Her experience was one of being ostracised from the kitchen team during her pregnancy:

... I was slowly becoming the outcast and the person they just did not want in the kitchen. Like he was, he ended up just being horrible, horrible, wouldn't talk to me, when I'd come in the morning like he won't even turn around to acknowledge me (25).

... he was asking me to do less and less and less and anytime I walked in he'd tut and roll his eyes... I was like, I'm actually not stupid, I'm just slowing down 'cause I'm fat and pregnant, I was like and you're an asshole (23-24).

For Adriana, although there was a clear hierarchy in the kitchen, which dictated how chefs at different levels were treated, a professional chef must respect everyone regardless of rank:

And you have to respect each other, no matter if you were just a trainee or kitchen porter or commis chef, you know, you, you're part of the team, so you had to be treated equal, that's why I think wasn't professional, you know (21-22).

For JS, the environment requires strategies to survive. He had to assert himself:

Yeah, I mean it is a dog-eat-dog environment and you have to be, I don't think you have to throw your toys out of the pram, I've never thought that, but you have to be strong enough to stand up for yourself otherwise you will be walked over (40).

David also realised showing weakness was dangerous, so he modified his behaviour to protect himself:

It's sometimes in a kitchen setting, it's not, it's not good to be maybe soft or like too caring or something like that... (27)

Like David, for JS it was important to protect and assert himself, but physically:

... I went in and had to get something from, I think a key for my locker, and I shouldn't really be in the kitchen... Next thing, a hoof up the backside. And then, ahh, ah oh that's sore. Turned around, it's the chef de partie, it was the rotisserie, 25 you know when you're 18, but I've just, all right, and what are you doing he said, you shouldn't be in the kitchen. But we just, you know, had a bit of a set-to, and then after that it was done. In some ways it's almost like you have to earn your place in there, you know, he won't take it so, let it go. (30)

For JS, he learned quickly that he had to stand up for himself, regardless of rank, to survive:

... I was so angry, I mean and the next thing I grab a hold of him, and this is, I mean I was actually yeah, first commis at the time. But he was just not a nice guy. And actually, it was the Irish fellow... big fella and he just grabbed me, what are you doing. So, the next thing I ended up in the Chef's Office and you know the chef said, you can't grab the executive sous chef by the scruff of the neck. I said no but he can't, he can't do that to me either, I mean look at the burns on my hands... (29)

Gianluca also adopted a similar strategy, learning quickly to employ aggression:

I think a week later of these one, of this abuse like, I start to yell at him and I literally kick him out from the kitchen and I told him like a, don't you ever dare to

step in this kitchen if I'm here, so that was me as, as a chef de partie, at nineteen years old to the boss father (40–41).

Gianluca is aware that he assimilated unprofessional behaviour:

... 'cause obviously, what I'm guessing is kind of the example you see, as I went to this other place at home, the chef was a yell at me for no reason, and I was a fifteen, I was yelling louder than him, as I wasn't taking anything, that was me at the point... (40).

Eventually, JS realises that imitating the same behaviour of the bully is a vicious circle:

And, and I find that staggering that it, you know, in some kitchens that's just the, how much it is now. But it's kind of, it's almost the norm, it's accepted... I mean it's a horrendous experience... it's almost like the alcoholic father isn't it, it passes it on to the son or, you know, domestic violence. It just seeps down (31).

Discussion

Workplace trauma – bullying and harassment, fear and competition, and drugs and alcohol – are deeply embedded in professional kitchens, especially at the high-end. The participants in this research are ordinary chefs, who represent the wider industry, such as hotels, restaurants, gastropubs, contract catering, nursing homes, delis, and bakeries. Similar issues prevail for these chefs, as those of their elite counterparts, indicating that trauma exists at all levels, and not just at the top where pressure may be perceived as the highest. Their experiences reinforce how unprofessional attitudes and behaviours are both prevalent and widely accepted in kitchens, as evidenced in the literature review, and confirm Angela Hartnett's criticism that change is slow (Lane 2014, 110).

The professional kitchen is perceived as differing from other work environments (Mack 2012, 86; Leer 2016, 78). Adriana worked as an accountant before becoming a chef. This may contribute to her early recognition of unprofessional behaviour and how it contrasted with her previous experiences. Later in her interview, the bullying she experienced was largely attributed to her gender, when she worked in an “unbalanced” male dominated kitchen, echoing Farrell's research (2022, 241). It is noteworthy that Adriana reluctantly mentioned “about the gender,” a similar sentiment expressed in Harris and Giuffre's book (2015, 198), where female chefs feared “they would be seen as complainers who were unworthy to work in professional kitchens.”

Jenny, when pregnant later in her career, experienced exclusion (Rasool *et al.* 2020; George 2023) by the head chef, who subtly encouraged her to leave of her own

accord, unlike chefs interviewed by Beertsen (2017), who were fired when they announced their pregnancy. Some of the male participants also acknowledged the issue of gender in kitchens, with JS describing it as “horrendous” treatment. In this toxic environment, and feeling ostracised, Jenny’s morale and motivation were eventually eroded as she felt like an “outcast” (Rasool *et al.* 2020), and she did not return to work after giving birth. This reinforces the inequality and challenges “when family matters come into play” (Farrell 2020, 241), and the barriers experienced by female chefs in the industry (Albors Garrigos *et al.* 2020, 460).

Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of “doxa” is revealed in the acceptance of unprofessional behaviours and attitudes, and whether to ignore, assimilate, or retaliate against them. While on one hand, female participants appeared to “endure” trauma, or “avoid” it (Meiser and Wilson 2023, 1), like Marita, who found it difficult to push back as the only “girl” in the kitchen. On the other hand, several of the male participants opted to “resist” it (2023, 1), becoming hardened to the culture (Bloisi and Hoel 2008), and opting to imitate and continue the violence (Mac Con Iomaire 2008, 46; Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper 2018, 1893–94). Gianluca, from a young age, assimilated the behaviour as “the example” he saw was the chef he became. JS attributed his actions to “earning” his “place” in the brigade by adopting a “macho” stance to survive (Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, and Cooper 2018, 1894). Regrettably, it “just seeps down” as JS surmised, and experiences of becoming the bully, or justifying the action, prolong the destructive cycle.

Another strategy to survive is modification. While one of the chefs in Gill and Burrow’s (2018, 452) study self-corrected his skills when shouted at, David modified his natural “caring” behaviour. For David, “caring” was at the core of his sense-making and meaning-making of professionalism; this was a common thread throughout his interview. David did not just modify his behaviour, but appears to have distanced himself from the aggression, referring to himself in the second person “he just threw it at ya and starts shouting and you just like, you’re stuck to the ground.” Although he considered himself “lucky” not to have had many experiences of bullying and harassment, as did JS, there is a sense that he discovered how to protect himself by hiding his “soft” side. For JS, mentoring and role-modelling were central to his sense of professionalism. He could not abide bullying since an early age, yet, in the kitchen, he modified his behaviour and, at times, felt compelled to become the bully.

Traumatic experiences in the workplace have negatively affected the participants’ professionalism, prompting them to adopt unprofessional behaviour, which conflicted with their inherent values. For many, ultimately, they expressed a desire to leave the profession. In direct contrast, returning to higher education to pursue a part-time degree, although challenging, was considered a safe and supportive space; a place to grow and transform personally and professionally. Furthermore, whilst reflecting on the topic of professionalism, several participants spoke of changes needed in the industry to support a positive work culture such as recognising the

value of formal education, acknowledgement of the chef's contribution to wider society, the need for effective human resource management, and an improvement to terms and conditions, including pay. Clearly, there is a compelling need to address trauma in professional kitchens, and this starts with recognising that such trauma exists, across the industry, and not just at the top, which this paper confirms. The next step is for all stakeholders to acknowledge not only the issues at hand, but, more importantly, their role in working together to implement meaningful change.

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