Creating New Stories, Creating New Lives: Applying Narrative Therapy to Survivors of Human Sex Trafficking
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ABSTRACT

The effects of trauma experienced by survivors of sexual human trafficking has been an under-researched topic in the psychological community. This study will review the current literature on the psychological and emotional implications associated with human sex trafficking, and analyze the components of narrative therapy and its previous application in treating domestic abuse trauma. This paper will explore the viability of narrative therapy as a method to treat the complicated traumas and stress developed over a lifetime of trafficking. Previous theoretical and empirical research indicates that narrative therapy may be a valuable tool for reauthoring new narratives in survivors of human sex trafficking. The proposed study will employ a method of narrative therapy to determine how effective it is in accommodating the needs presented by this demographic. To measure the success of narrative therapy for the proposed study, the Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale will be utilized to identify the patient’s symptom severity before, during, and after treatment.

INTRODUCTION

The psychological community at large has yet to recognize that treatment of persons recovered from human trafficking requires greater attention and further research in order to provide successful treatment. Nancy M. Shiels, PsyD, supervising clinical psychologist for Kaiser Permanente Redwood City and chair of the original Dr. 52 Trafficking Task Force states that “the emphasis thus far has been on generating perpetrators and ending the victim’s immediate practical and medical needs rather than addressing the psychological damage that being trafficked can cause” (Ogi, 2011, p.72). Survivors of sexual exploitation often struggle with traumas associated with forced isolation, verbal and physical abuse, neglect of their basic necessities of living, guaranteed anxiety, depression, learned helplessness, emotional abuse, and complex posttraumatic stress disorder (Ogi, 2011). When combined, these clinical issues require very unique psychological approaches that address the emotional and cognitive traumas of the past in the clients' return control of their future and living situation.

PROPOSED METHOD OF STUDY

Objectives and Participants

The driving theory which guides this study hypothesizes that narrative therapy will be an effective form of psychological treatment for the traumas experienced by survivors of sexual human trafficking. The objective for the research includes establishing a new mode of therapy for victims of sex trafficking, and to provide effective counseling for women who have been trafficked.

The proposed study will gather 25 female survivors of the sex-trade of various nationalities. They will range between the ages of 15 and 26, and will be in the process of attaining a temporary visa (T-Visa) in order to remain in the United States. The proposed study aims to provide effective counseling which focuses on rebuilding an autonomous identity for the participants as a victim of sexual trafficking. The ultimate goal of this literature analysis is to propose a study that utilizes narrative therapy as a new mode of treatment.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative research design will measure symptom ratings based on the Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale, a 49 item questionnaire that gauges symptom severity and functioning (Foa, 1995). This questionnaire will provide thorough data on aspects of trauma involving anxiety, depression, and PTSD during the therapeutic process. Over the course of 12 weeks involving 1 hour per week, the therapist (in collaboration with a translator if necessary) will focus on defining the dominant story, externalizing the issue, and constructing new stories. Participants will be asked to complete the questionnaires at specific intervals of therapy: before treatment, after 5 weeks of treatment, and post treatment. Findings will be evaluated using either SPSS Software or hand scoring with an assessment key that is included with the testing packet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Traumatic Effects of Sex Trafficking

A report published by Zimmerman et al. (2006) from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine analyzed the prevalence of violence, freedom of movement, and the resulting psychological problems experienced by 207 European women who had been trafficked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological Problem</th>
<th>Percent (% of Women (n=207))</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearfulness</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttraumatic Stress Disorder</td>
<td>15%</td>
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The Components of Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy is an approach that emphasizes ‘personal agency’. White explains that “personal agency is the capacity for responsible action,” which entails that the client establish control of their emotions, reactions, and interpretations of events (as cited in White, 2010, p.229). Establishing personal agency would be a positive step in helping re-write their life narratives and move forward in overcoming what has become their ‘dominant story’. In narrative therapy it is believed that every person’s life contains stories that can be dominantly over others, and these dominant stories have a heavy influence on personal identity (White, 2009).

The Legal Process: A Potential Obstacle in Therapy

Working with a population that is likely applying for T-Visa status during the time of therapy offers unique challenges that must be acknowledged in order to administer successful treatment while their immigration status is pending.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

Narrative therapy is a method that will address the underlying issues of trauma and empower clients to regain stability over their life, identity, and mental health. Further research using narrative therapy on sex trafficking survivors will provide a new mode of treatment that simultaneously addresses the trauma previously experienced and acknowledges the potentially re-traumatizing effect of the legal process as it occurs. Further studies can address the generalizability of these results to male and transgendered victims of sex trafficking. In addition to the limitations of generalizability for those populations, it will also be challenging to generalize the results of survivors applying for T-Visa status to those who are not in the legal process of gaining a T-Visa. Additional research in this area would further validate the use of narrative therapy for this population.