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Experiences of Female Sex Trafficking Survivors: A Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

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Keywords

Sex Trafficking, Trauma, Victimization, Violence, Phenomenology

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Experiences of Female Sex Trafficking Survivors: A Phenomenological Analysis

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Human sex trafficking is a worldwide issue that affects millions of people. Victims of this industry undergo numerous traumatic events, which greatly impact their lives. Given the prevalence and traumatic nature of the sex trafficking industry, there is a need to raise greater awareness of victims' experiences. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of 15 female survivors of sex trafficking, who shared their stories on equalitynow.org. Using phenomenology, the researchers answered the following questions: "What are the experiences of female survivors of sexual human trafficking within the industry?" and "How do survivors make sense of those experiences?" The analysis resulted in 6 themes and 10 subthemes that describe the lived experiences of female survivors of sex trafficking. Clinical implications and future research recommendations are discussed. Keywords: Sex Trafficking, Trauma, Victimization, Violence, Phenomenology

Introduction

Human trafficking is a global social issue and is the second largest criminal industry in the world earning an estimated 32 billion dollars (UNICEF, 2013). Human trafficking has numerous definitions, but mainly describes the process of one person being forced into service by another individual, with these services including forced labor, sex trafficking, bonded labor, debt bondage, involuntary domestic servitude, and child soldiering (Wilson & Butler, 2014). This social issue is a prevalent form of human exploitation (Faulkner, Mahapatra, Cook Heffron, Nsonwu, & Busch-Armendariz, 2013) that affects individuals globally despite their race, ethnicity, gender, age, educational level, and geographic location (Zhang, 2009).

Of the forms of human trafficking, sex trafficking is the fastest growing form worldwide, as it is a market-driven industry based on demand and supply (Hodge, 2008; Macy & Johns, 2011; Samarasinghe, 2009; United Nations, 2002). According to the International Labour Organization (2012), approximately 4.5 million individuals are victims of sex trafficking. This statistic is an approximation as it is not possible to pinpoint the actual number of victims. Similarly, specific statistics on traffickers and pimps is unknown. Traffickers and pimps can be strangers, acquaintances, intimate partners, or even family members of victims (Dahal, Joshi, & Swahnberg, 2015; Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013; Meshkovska, Siegel, Stutterheim, & Bos, 2015). A common misconception is that traffickers and pimps are males, however, it is important to note that females also take on these roles. In fact, victims of sex trafficking and current or former female sex workers can become recruiters and madams themselves (Meshkovska et al., 2015).

Traffickers and pimps tend to target individuals by taking advantage of their pressing needs. Targeted individuals include, but are not limited to, immigrants, unemployed, females, children, homeless, orphans, sex and gender minorities, runaway youth, individuals from economically or politically instable countries, and individuals with limited resources and a history of abuse, trauma, and relational conflict (Dalla, Xia, & Kennedy, 2003; Gajic-Veljanoski, & Stewart, 2007; Smith, Vardaman, & Snow, 2009; Orme & Ross-Sheriff, 2015). These individuals become involved in the sex trafficking industry due to traffickers' and pimps'

use of deception, coercion, and force. They may use deception strategies by distributing false employment ads and may use force in the form of kidnapping or drugging (Dahal et al., 2015; O'Brien, Carpenter, & Hayes, 2013). Individuals may be coerced through employment advertisements in a foreign country that may seem appealing for those who are striving to escape poverty, immigrate to a different country, are in need of financial resources, have an existing debt, or need money to support their family (Dahal et al., 2015; Zhang, 2009). At other times, victims may be forced into the industry due to their family members or friends selling them to traffickers with the belief that they will receive compensation (Zimmerman et al., 2006).

Human sex trafficking affects individuals of diverse backgrounds and characteristics. Victims tend to originate from less developed geographic locations such as South Asia, Central and South America, and Eastern Europe, and be transported to more developed locations such as Western Europe, North America, Asia, and the Middle East (Zhang, 2009). In some countries, human sex trafficking is more prevalent, but no country is protected from its occurrence and any country can serve as a source, transit, and destination (U. S. Department of State, 2017; Zhang, 2009). Asian countries have been known to have higher rates of sex trafficking while Eastern European and the Middle Eastern countries have had the fastest growth of trafficking and unwillful forced prostitution (Kara, 2010). Given the global impact of sex trafficking, in this study we explore how female survivors make sense of their experiences in the industry.

Sex Trafficking Victims' Experiences

As sex trafficking victims become part of the industry they not only lose their freedom, but also experience multiple traumatic events caused by one or more perpetrators. Typically, traumatic experiences start immediately, and victims are introduced to the industry through abuse such as gang rapes, threat, and beatings to break them in and gain power and control (O'Brien et al., 2013). Victims find themselves trapped or are physically limited to specific areas (Vindhya & Dev, 2011) and are forced to provide sexual services. Victims' freedom is taken by the use of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, which results in powerlessness and helplessness in every aspect of their lives (Faulkner et al., 2013). They lose their autonomy, voice, right to make decisions, and are completely isolated, which often makes victims completely reliant on their trafficker(s) (Herman, 1997).

The experience of recurring trauma in the form of continuous abuse, threats, force, and social isolation puts victims at short and long term physical and psychological health risks. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, dissociative disorders, and substance-related disorders are some of the prevalent diagnoses of sex trafficking survivors (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2003; Zimmerman & Watts, 2004). Victims' physical health is jeopardized by malnutrition, exposure to unsanitary conditions, unprotected sexual acts, and lack of medical care (Zimmerman, Hossain, & Watts, 2011). This environment can result in detrimental health outcomes including sexually transmitted infections and diseases, unsafe abortions and consequences related to them, physical injuries (broken bones, nerve damage, dental complications), headaches, exhaustion, pelvic pain, stomach pain, and dizziness (Cwikel, Chudakov, Paikin, Agmon, & Belmaker, 2004; Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Control and power. A significant part of victims' experiences in the industry is the loss of control and power. Initiation into the industry begins with traffickers and pimps gaining control and power over victims as the primary strategy to manipulate and profit from victims. For instance, pimps may gain control by threatening to harm victims' loved ones if they do not comply. Another commonly used control tactic is to take away victims' documentation (Gajic-

Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007). Not having proper documentation and/or being considered illegal in the destination country limits victims' ability to seek assistance due to a fear of being detained and legally charged. These events make it common for victims to experience helplessness, to be isolated, and fear for their life. Therefore, they are more susceptible to abide by the rules established by the pimps, which makes it more difficult to exit the sex trafficking industry.

Objectification. Within the sex trafficking industry victims are treated as sexual objects. Their primary role is to provide sexual gratification to customers and pimps (Dahal et al., 2015), and this role results in minimizing or neglecting other identities. Over time, victims internalize the message that their only value is selling their bodies to meet the sexual and financial needs of those profiting from the industry. This objectification often results in victims devaluing who they are as a person and dismissing their competencies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It also promotes lack of self-worth, increased self-hatred, greater feelings of hopelessness (Downs, James, & Cowan, 2006), can place one at risk for suicidality (Dahal et al., 2015), and other mental health issues including disordered eating and depression in women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Ultimately, objectification implies to victims that they are unworthy of better treatment, they are inferior to others, and that their only value is their ability to provide sexual services.

Substance Use. In response to repeated trauma, victims report seeking relief through specific coping strategies. Unfortunately, many of the strategies victims engage in are destructive (i.e., alcohol, drugs, self-harm, suicide attempts). Alcohol and drug use are common coping mechanisms that victims implement in an attempt to deal with stressful and traumatic daily life events and to numb the pain of their experiences. Being isolated, controlled, and limited in their resources and connections, victims lack the ability to access and use more effective coping techniques. Victims also report substance use to meet the demands of the industry. For example, victims may use alcohol as a way to feel warm while on the streets in winter or take drugs that promote alertness to sustain longer hours (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Finally, addictive substances may be forced upon victims by traffickers for several purposes (e.g., abduction, preventing escape); the primary goal is controlling victims. Although there are numerous reasons victims may use addictive substances, what is consistent is that substance use is high in the industry and thus a common part of trafficking victims' experiences. Substance use poses many risks for victims such as increased risk-taking behaviors, addiction to substances, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and health risks due to unsafe drug administration (Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Social Barriers to Reintegration

Sex trafficking is not the same as prostitution, and the two are often distinguished by determining whether the prostitution is voluntary (U.S. Department of State, 2010). However, the legal status of prostitution can have an influence on victims' and society's perceptions. Countries vary on their legal regulations for prostitution, pimping, and brothel ownership. Given the diverse regulations and laws in the world, it can make it difficult to grasp the extent and complexity of sex trafficking. Of additional importance is the recognition that the legality or criminalization of prostitution is a controversial issue. Stances on this issue focus on how legality would impact demand (Samarasinghe, 2009; Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007), or lead to safer and improved conditions for sex workers (Nawyn, Birdal, & Glogower, 2013; Meshkovska et al., 2015; Weitzer, 2012) which would promote better working conditions, recognition of their human rights, and mandatory health checks, which in turn can reduce or prevent the spread of the sex trafficking industry (Huisman & Kleemans, 2014; Mossman, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Understanding the current legal status of prostitution is critical, as these laws influence society's attitudes towards those in the industry. Jonsson and Jakobsson (2017) emphasize that it is essential to understand attitudes people hold toward prostitution since it can lead to stigmatization and influence the sex market. Views on sex trafficking are also influenced by myths concerning the industry, such as victims being seen as corrupt, degraded, lacking morals and values, and responsible for their situations (Dahal et al., 2015). Not only do these views limit those outside of the industry's willingness to help victims, but they foster an environment of stigmatization. Stigma isolates victims, creates a barrier to reintegration after exiting the industry, and may prevent victims from reaching out for services (Dahal et al., 2015). It is critical to understand this aspect of victims' experience, as lack of social support is a risk factor for re-entry to the industry and a supportive, safe environment is an essential part of effective recovery and reintegration (Meshkovska et al., 2015).

Purpose of the Study

Knowing that sex trafficking is a worldwide phenomenon and that it leads victims to experience detrimental consequences, the purpose of this study is to explore how female survivors make sense of their experiences through a phenomenological lens and expand the understanding of survivors' lives while in the sex trafficking industry. Consistent with the phenomenological approach, researchers focused on identifying the commonality of survivors' experiences and the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The research questions established for this study were, "What are the experiences of female survivors of sexual human trafficking within the industry?" and "How do survivors make sense of those experiences?"

Methods

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach used to study in depth lived experiences and the meaning attached to those experiences (Creswell, 2013; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Phenomenology allows participants' subjective reality to be studied within a specific shared phenomenon and provides space for diverse voices and perspectives, as such it is a well-suited approach to explore survivors' experiences within human sex trafficking. Researchers' task is to maintain the participants' meaning of their experiences while describing the essence of the phenomenon and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2013). To stay close to participants' views, the researchers integrated a social constructivism epistemology, which allows for the recognition of cultural and personal beliefs, experiences, and values that influence and inform the researchers' understanding and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007). Through this epistemological lens researchers and participants co-create the understanding of the phenomenon.

Sample

The sample in this study was purposive and gathered through a secondary source, equalitynow.org webpage, which contained 15 stories of female survivors of sex trafficking. Stories from this webpage were chosen due to their lengthy discussion of personal experiences in the sex trafficking industry from survivors originating from 12 different countries (Australia, Cambodia, Canada, Germany, India, Lithuania, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, United States, United Kingdom, and Uganda). The countries listed varied in their legal status of prostitution and brothels. Due to the public nature of the data, informed consent was not necessary and/or possible to be obtained (Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

Further, we did not have direct contact with the participants (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Collecting data from an existing source prohibited the ability to gather additional demographic information.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began with researchers thoroughly reading each survivor's story twice. During the initial reading of the material the researchers familiarized themselves with the data and recorded reflections to each story. Reflections and memos helped researchers to identify personal views and reactions to be aware of personal biases that may influence the interpretations. The second reading consisted of each researcher highlighting significant statements, identifying meanings, and ascribing codes, while using the research questions as a guide for the selection of significant statements. All the stories were coded and processed in this manner. Next, generated codes and reflections were discussed by the researchers to gain a deeper grasp of the personal interpretations of the data. When disagreements on codes emerged, reevaluation of the stories and personal interpretations took place until an agreement was reached. After consensus, codes were recorded in a spreadsheet. After coding all sets of data, codes were cut out and clustered together based on similarities. This was helpful in visualizing emergent themes and the interconnectedness of codes. The following step consisted of assigning a name to the clusters of codes that belonged to a theme. Additionally, for each theme the researchers provided a description and identified example statements/quotes from participants that captured its essence (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

Trustworthiness

Researchers implemented the phenomenological analysis guidelines outlined in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), which allowed them to follow the analysis procedure for the chosen methodology. Following Creswell's (2013) recommendation for validation strategies, three strategies were incorporated in this study: bracketing, external audits, and use of multiple coders to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. During the initial readings of the stories researchers recorded their reflections and memos to outline personal views (bracketing) on the studied phenomenon allowing the focus to be solely on the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). In order to have the presence of participants' voices, researchers prioritized the participants' words and descriptions by not taking data out of the context, not changing the meaning, and utilizing direct quotes. Researchers also collaborated with an external auditor whose role was to critically examine the data and assess the accuracy of the research process and findings. The final strategy used consisted of intercoder agreement checks as researchers coded each set of data independently and met to discuss coding results and find consensus (Creswell, 2013).

Of additional importance, the researchers play an integral role in the analysis and must be aware of their role in influencing the themes. The first author witnessed display of females in the Red Light District in Amsterdam as a child, which promoted curiosity about how females enter and escape from the industry and what their lives and experiences are like. The second author had clinical experience working survivors of sex trafficking. These experiences have influenced the way the researchers approached the study, and the researchers acknowledged their level of empathy towards females in the sex trafficking industry and their opposition towards objectification of females. All three authors are researchers and clinicians who seek to bring greater awareness about the lives of victims of sex trafficking. All authors engaged in memo writing to acknowledge their values and to recognize the influence they played in this study.

Results

Personal narratives of the lived experiences of female sex trafficking survivors were analyzed and six themes were identified: *Experiences with Pimps, Clients, and Gang Members*; *Perceptions of Men in Power*; *Internalized Feelings and Ways of Dealing*; *Frustrations with the Legal System*; *“If Only You Can Feel the Pain in Our Hearts”*; and *Finding Purpose in Life*. Four of the six themes generated subthemes. The themes addressed the established research questions. Themes 1 and 4 address the first research question (What are the experiences of female survivors of sexual human trafficking within the industry?). Themes 2, 3, and 5 addressed the second research question (How do survivors make sense of those experiences?). Theme 6 addressed both questions. Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes.

Table 1
Theme 1: Experiences with Pimps, Clients, and Gang Members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abuse • Exploitation • Objectification
Theme 2: Perceptions of Men in Power
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings Toward Pimps • “Men are Bad”
Theme 3: Emotional Impact and Ways of Dealing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-esteem • Feeling Hopeless • Coping Strategies
Theme 4: Frustrations with the Legal System
Theme 5: “If Only You Can Feel the Pain in Our Hearts”
Theme 6: Finding Purpose in Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Connection and Hope • Desire to Help Others

Theme 1: Experiences with Pimps, Clients, and Gang Members

The theme *Experiences with Pimps, Clients, and Gang Members* summarizes the participants’ experiences in the sex industry directly related to the people they were forced to interact with. Within theme 1, there are three subthemes: *abuse and threats*, *exploitation*, and

objectification. The participants described being mistreated, humiliated, abused, and controlled by the individuals involved, as well as how those treatments impacted them.

Abuse. This theme suggests that victims are exposed to diverse violent acts throughout their time in the industry. Specifically, violence was used as a way of introducing them to sex trafficking and maintaining control over them. Ten participants addressed being abused by their pimps, gang members, and clients. At the beginning of the females' involvement in the industry, abuse was used as a form of breaking them in:

On that first night, some men took me to a flat and gang raped me for six hours. There was a queue of men outside the door; one would finish and another would come in. Now, when I look back, it feels like it was a test to see if I could be a good prostitute.

Experiences of abuse, as described above, show that it is used as a technique to promote victims' submission. In addition to the sexual abuse, emotional abuse was another tactic used to initially control victims. Traffickers would threaten to harm victims' loved ones, such as their families. A participant stated, "She (madam) started threatening me and my family back home, who begged me to comply." These abusive breaking in strategies helped pimps and traffickers to create a controlling and submissive environment for victims that is based on threats, fear, and hopelessness.

When describing their experiences, participants described the cruel nature of the abuse as one participant recalled: "[Brothel owner] ordered the brothel madam to beat me with a leather belt every day. I still bear these marks on my body. I was kept locked inside a room, with no food or water, for days." Other participants described how abuse was a common way of punishing victims: "They punished me by stripping and beating me with a stick until I fainted, electrocuting me, cutting me, and pouring salt water on the cuts, and placing my hands into a bamboo press for up to 20 minutes" and "I was hit and beat for things that weren't my fault and when I would say something smart, I was raped and called dumb." These quotes portray the different types of abuse and their complexity.

Exploitation. This subtheme refers to the sexual, labor, and caretaking exploitation experiences. Four participants' narratives addressed the different ways they recall being exploited. After providing sexual services, victims were forced to do domestic work, which led to overwork and exhaustion. For example, one participant stated: "After serving clients, I would often have to wash the dishes and take care of the children in the house." Exploitation was also a form of control as they were rarely paid for their work. Quite often pimps would confiscate victims' earned money, leaving them with fewer resources increasing their inability to escape. One participant stated: "I couldn't go anywhere, I never got the money – they gave me drugs, curses, and beatings instead. Sometimes, they checked me and took money that some guests passed directly to me." This exploitation strategy made victims with a debt bondage more vulnerable and left without resources. An example of this becomes evident in the participant's statement: "I worked for this woman and her family every day for the equivalent of \$12.50 U.S. a month. The woman forced me to clean, cook, and wash non-stop."

Objectification. This subtheme represents the experience of being degraded and treated as an object. Through objectification victims were minimized and seen as only serving one purpose - sexual gratification. Three participants addressed being treated as objects by men. One participant mentioned, "One punter (slang term for men who buy sex) actually resuscitated me and then carried on doing what he was doing to me," which highlighted the degrading treatment towards victims. Another participant compared the received treatment to feeling like a purchasable item by stating: "To the men who buy us, we are like meat." Women were not only objectified by pimps and customers, but also by society. One participant provided

an example: “Filipina women are often referred to as ‘little brown fucking machines’ by service man.” Societal objectification justifies customers’ behaviors and treatment of victims. For example, one participant recalls a customer telling her he prefers Filipina women “because the women are cheap, way cheaper than Japanese women. And besides, you can do what you like,” which further promotes the notion of objectification and submission.

Theme 2: Perceptions of Men in Power

The theme of *Perceptions of Men in Power* reflects females’ feelings and views of males while in the sex trafficking industry. Theme two had two subthemes, *feelings towards pimps* and “*men are bad*,” which highlight how the traumatic experiences with pimps and clients impacted their views of men in general.

Feelings towards pimp. In this theme the contrasting nature of participants’ feelings towards pimps is discussed by four participants. Some females were introduced to the industry by their significant others at the time, which left them puzzled due to discrepancies between their feelings, and the acts that were committed towards them. The betrayal they experienced led to greater emotional struggles:

His earlier promises of love and a future together were now followed by beatings, rapes and humiliation. There was no way back for me. He was the only person I had in this world and I didn’t want to lose him. After all, I loved him.

Another participant described the pain of the betrayal far surpassing their experiences of physical abuse: “I’ve been tortured and abused, and survived serious injuries inflicted by buyers and pimps, but nothing hurts as much as the pain of being deceived by the man I loved.” Victims seemed to get accustomed to the physical abuse, but grappled with the emotional confusion associated with their loved one betraying and forcing them into the sex trafficking industry.

Another commonly reported feeling toward pimps was anger. While one participant’s anger was expressed by pointing out the injustice of pimps’ actions, “Women are not slaves and traffickers should stop taking other people’s children. No one should be forced; buyers, pimps and traffickers are killing human beings and spreading sickness. They should prostitute themselves if they want money!” Another participant’s anger was expressed in the desire for violent eradication of pimps: “Pimps should be gunned down, so that none of them are left in this earth.” Despite all the emotional and physical pain, the complexity of feelings towards pimps were reflected throughout the stories on a continuum from love to hate, which highlights victims’ attempts to make sense of their experiences and relationships with the pimps.

“Men are bad.” This subtheme is comprised of how females’ experiences with clients and pimps impacted their perceptions of male figures. Given participants’ interactions with male customers, pimps, and gangs members, they tended to characterize men as being bad individuals. For example, one stated, “I think that 99% of men are not nice human beings; they have no respect for women. I don’t trust any men. I sometimes still have nightmares about a client who treated me badly.” Similarly, another participant shared, “I hated clients. The buyers are dogs, 90% of men are players.” The belief of “men are bad” was present while in the industry and persisted after exiting, a feeling exemplified by this quote, “I realized that I cannot keep a long-term relationship with any men, probably because I hate how men have treated me.” Maintaining healthy relationships with men outside the industry was challenging due to previous experiences and feeling of hatred towards men.

Theme 3: Emotional Impact and Ways of Dealing

The theme of *Emotional Impact and Ways of Dealing* captures the emotional impact of their experiences, which reduced self-esteem and created feelings of hopelessness. This theme also describes how victims attempted to manage the emotional impact. After data analysis the three subthemes that emerged include *self-esteem*, *feeling hopeless*, and *coping strategies*.

Self-esteem. In this subtheme seven participants either explicitly or implicitly discussed a negative self-evaluation. The essence of this subtheme can be captured in the excerpt of one participant: “To feel 2 inches tall when 5’1” is where you started.” Self-esteem appeared to be a flexible construct that was based on participants’ experiences prior to entering and while in the industry.

Low self-esteem prior to entry into the sex trafficking was reported, “The years of heartache and pain from my family and then to guys I would date, made my self-esteem really low.” Pre-existing low self-esteem was identified as a factor that kept victims in the industry and strengthened their disbelief in ability to have a better life, “So many girls out there prostituting don’t believe in themselves or in trying to do something different. Some are just brought up around it so they don’t know anything else – it’s just normal to them.” Further, receiving attention from customers served as a self-esteem booster, as stated in the following quote: “I had very low self-esteem issues and body image issues, so I found it exhilarating that men chose me.”

For others, low self-esteem developed while in the industry. Some participants mentioned a significant moment, specifically their first sexual encounter with a customer, that lowered their self-esteem, “The first time I sold my body I was scared and disgusted,” and “That night after I sold my body, I felt repulsed. I wouldn’t get out of the shower until I washed everything away.” Additionally, for some participants self-esteem altered based on their aging and changes in the physical appearance: “As I got older, I got fatter and my self-esteem got lower. Money was not that great anymore ‘cause I couldn’t stand there as much knowing that I didn’t look the same as when I first started on the streets.” Finally, another participant shared how not seeing worth in herself prevented her from advocating for her health, “If someone had given me a condom I wouldn’t have had the self-esteem to use one.”

Feeling hopeless. The subtheme of *feeling hopeless* touches on participants’ disbelief of having a meaningful life. Specifically, six participants expressed a sense of hopelessness in their stories. Participants described feeling numb and hopeless: “I was still breathing, but somehow I didn’t really feel alive” and the need to shut down and escape from their life “I would see injuries on me after punters had used me and not know where they’d come from. I mentally closed down.” Others discussed their hopelessness in their own devaluation of their lives, “I felt hopeless because I didn’t think anything of my life. I was a slave prostitute” and “I didn’t feel like I deserved to live or not get a disease.” Feelings of hopelessness seemed to further promote isolation and a lack of self-worth as victims did not believe they deserve better treatment.

Coping strategies. Given the environment in the industry, participants developed diverse coping methods to deal with emotional pain, physical and sexual abuse, as well as the lack of support. Some of the mentioned coping strategies were smoking, drug use, and alcohol use. Five participants described their coping strategies to numb the pain and gain the courage to survive each day. One participant explained her attempt to numb her pain through drugs and stated it being ineffective, “I quickly became a drug user because it helped ease my distress but ultimately the drugs didn’t help me lose my pain.” Another participant, who used drugs as a coping method, stated: “Many girls stay in prostitution just so they can buy drugs, but the majority of them only became drug addicts to escape their terrible lives.” Initially drugs seemed to be used as temporary relief of emotional pain, however, a developed drug addiction kept

some of the victims in the industry. To survive the sex trafficking industry, victims had to adjust and accept the new norms established by their pimps, traffickers, and customers. A participant shared this experience by stating, “the feelings of self-loathing and such become normal...which is why I guess the drinking, drugs and dysfunctional relationships became normal.”

Theme 4: Frustrations with the Legal System

The theme *Frustration with the Legal System* represents participants’ disagreements with the legalization of prostitution and men’s sexual demands. Eight participants addressed how the legal status of prostitution serves as justification of men’s demands. For example, one participant stated, “The government says it’s ok; the law says it’s ok so why would they question it?” In addition, legal prostitution presents a financial solution for low income families in need of income. One participant addressed it in the following way, “With prostitution legal, I feel like it’s easier to enter into prostitution and more difficult to exit. I think that underage prostitution has increased, and I saw more families prostituting together.” Several participants described the need for criminalizing demand. One participants stated:

Male orgasm should no longer be allowed to dictate women’s oppression and that is exactly what it is currently doing. The male demand keeps the whole cycle going and they need to be held accountable for the abuse they are perpetrating. They should face legal consequences for using their power and money to take advantage of women and girls’ desperation.

Addressing the issue of demand was viewed as the way to stop sex trafficking by another participant, “To stop sex trafficking and prostitution, I think going after the root of the problem is the biggest help and the root is the male demand for paid sexual access to women and children’s bodies.”

Theme 5: “If only you can feel the pain in our hearts.”

The theme of “*If Only You Can Feel the Pain in Our Hearts*” addresses eight participants’ interpretations of how society views prostitution and females in the sex industry, specifically their disappointment with society’s lack of understandings of victims and their struggles. A participant stated, “Society’s understanding of human trafficking and prostitution needs to change. In my country, people believe that prostitutes are criminals and buyers are the victims.” Another participant shared that some people do not even think trafficking is a matter that is happening in the world, “...someone said to me that they didn’t think trafficking is real. What do you mean? I am real. I am here.” Having these messages diminishes participants’ experience and struggles in the sex industry and leaves this social issue as not being worthy of attention.

Participants also expressed feeling misunderstood by society due to their lack of awareness of their experiences. It appears to participants that society is misinformed about their lives, and thus, makes assumptions that guide them in their views of victims and what sex trafficking entails. One participant explained, “When people tell me that women choose this life, I can’t help but laugh. Do they know how many women like me have tried to escape, but have been beaten black and blue when they are caught?” This type of misunderstanding of the sex trafficking industry and victims’ roles results in bystander behaviors. Not receiving help from bystanders increased the sense of isolation. One participant recalled not getting help while trying to escape:

Even though I cried, screamed for someone to help me, people just stood by watching, without even a look of sympathy. Tears stream down my face as I think back to that day. If even one man had tried to save me, my life would have been changed. But all of them stood there like mute spectators.

Similarly, another participant expressed it in her poem by stating: “She wants to be free, but she can’t do it alone, she needs me. And I need a team to help me finish where it starts. If only you could feel the pain in our hearts.”

Theme 6: Finding Purpose in Life

The theme of *Finding Purpose in Life* represents the participants attempts to move forward after leaving the industry and consists of two subthemes: *sense of connection* and *desire to help others*. The first subtheme attends to the importance of having a support system or connections to help them exit the industry. The second subtheme addresses participants’ desires to be advocates for change, provide support, and bring awareness to the social issue of human trafficking.

Sense of connection and hope. This subtheme was evident in the stories of eight participants describing the importance of a support system to build connection and hope in order to be able to identify and pursue a better future outside of sex trafficking. Being connected to organizations that fight human trafficking opened the door for participants’ futures, as one stated, “I felt hopeful for the first time that I could leave prostitution. It took me some time, but I permanently exited prostitution last year.” While others recognized that without an organization they may never have escaped, “If they [Project Respect] had not helped to get me a job, I would probably still be there,” “I was trapped for years before I met some lovely people from FREEDOM and Drug Arm who asked me if I wanted to leave and helped me to get out of prostitution. They've been helping me get a job in a profession I've always dreamed of, but never thought would come true” and “I was successful in leaving because of my friend, the outreach worker who was willing to meet me where I was, on my terms.” Through connections participants were not only able to develop hope, but were also able to escape and start creating plans for their future.

Desire to help others. Through victims’ journeys in and out of sex trafficking, a desire to reach out to others and help them better their lives was emphasized by eight participants’ narratives. One way participants helped others while in the industry was to protect victims from pimps or abusive clients: “I tried to protect her; she was supposed to be in the foster home, but she was being pimped out.” Once escaping sex trafficking, other participants committed to helping through advocacy work, by joining organizations, speaking out, reaching out to victims, and informing the general public about what was happening in the sex industry. One participant stated “I want to write a book, so people can know the reality,” and two others expressed “Yes, maybe I want to get a new start. But I want my voice to help others whose world has fallen apart,” and “I want to help people that have been through things like me. I want women to know that we have a chance; we have a life out there and I want them to know that they have options.” This desire to help extended to working on shutting down the industry, “I will continue to work towards the abolition of prostitution.” Overall, this theme highlights participants’ determination to help directly or indirectly while and after being involved in sex trafficking.

Discussion

The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of female survivors of sex trafficking. Narratives of survivors offer a first-hand perspective on victims' lives while in the sex trafficking industry, how they make sense of their experiences, and more importantly provides space for their voices. Specifically, participants' narratives provided insight to their experiences with those in this industry (i.e., pimps, gang members, and clients), the internalized effects of those experiences, society's views of females in the sex industry, the impact of legality and demand of prostitution, and the development of hope through support systems.

Sex trafficking victims are exposed to numerous traumatic experiences at the hands of their traffickers and customers. Traumatic events most commonly include a variety of types of violence, including torture, physical assault, rape, being threatened with a weapon, starvation, being burned, or genital mutilation (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; Wilson & Dalton, 2008). Consistent with previous research, participants stated that in order to be 'introduced' to the industry, pimps continuously implemented psychological, physical, and sexual abuse as a control tactic (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2013), which were described in the theme 1 subtheme *abuse and threats*. Additional traumatic experiences of the participants included being exploited and objectified. Sex trafficking victims have described how their traffickers give them messages that their only talent is selling their bodies (Wilson & Butler, 2014) and they force them to dress in revealing outfits or be naked. Victims report that they internalize the message that they are a sexual commodity (Karandikar & Prospero, 2010).

One of the main outcomes associated with sex trafficking is complex trauma. As stated previously, pimps and traffickers tend to target vulnerable individuals (Vindhya & Dev, 2011), which makes it easier to manipulate, exploit, and abuse them. Thus, victims may enter the industry with a pre-existing trauma history, and quickly be exposed to further trauma at post-entry (Wilson & Butler, 2014). Such trauma impacts sex trafficking victims' short and long term emotional, physical, and psychological well-being (Burnette et al., 2008). Participants in this study described feeling hopeless, having low self-esteem, and having "pain in our hearts," which are similar psychological outcomes associated with sex trafficking victimization (Wilson & Butler, 2014). Other studies have found that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common consequence of victimization. In fact, Farley et al. (2003) found that 68% of the victims in their study from a nine-country sample met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. Several of the themes from this study mirror the diagnostic criterion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013) for post-traumatic stress disorder. For example, significant stressors (e.g., abuse, treat, exploitation) were described in theme 1, which is consistent with criterion A (stressors) in DSM-V. Additionally, theme 3, the emotional impact and ways of dealing is consistent with criteria C (avoidance) and D (negative alterations in cognitions and mood) (APA, 2013).

Sex trafficking victims' stories are full of traumatic events and their experiences leave victims seeking ways to manage and cope with the aftermath. Unfortunately, research indicates that the coping strategies implemented by victims tend to consist of self-harming behaviors, drug use, and suicide attempts (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; Wilson & Butler, 2014). These coping behaviors were also reported by participants in this study as they mentioned using substances, specifically alcohol and drugs, as a way to numb their pain. Although identified by participants as a way of dealing, participants reported substance use was an ineffective way to cope, as it only provided a temporary solution. Further, substance use was also recognized by participants to be one more way in which those in the industry manipulated and controlled victims. These findings mirror previous research that substance use can be a precursor to involvement in sex trafficking (Weber, Boivin, Blais, Haley, & Roy, 2004), substance use was

a tactic used by traffickers to control victims, and by victims to cope with trauma (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009),

In the sex trafficking industry, victims have limited social interactions with their social circle primarily confined to pimps, traffickers, and customers. These individuals are made of a higher proportion of males (Hughes, 2004) and survivors' experiences with males in the sex industry can inform their views of men in general. Most of those experiences are filled with abuse, objectification, humiliation, force, and control (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009), which offers insight into why many participants described their decision to disengage from any future interactions with males. As a consequence of victims' experiences, participants reported no longer trusting males, avoiding romantic relationships, being fearful of re-experiencing trauma, or having difficulty maintaining relationship with men. The theme of "*males are bad*" may lead to difficulty with recovery and reintegration after escaping the sex industry. This issue has been addressed in existing treatment literature, which suggests victims will need to address how to manage intimate relationships as part of their recovery (Månsson & Hedin, 1999). For instance, participants described feeling betrayed, which has a negative impact on trust. Reduced levels of trust have been found to hinder the ability to develop new and meaningful relationships (Dalla, 2006).

A final theme of our study captured victims' frustrations with the legal system. Many of the participants' experiences took place in countries where prostitution is legal. When prostitution is legal, common myths include: women are responsible for the way they are treated, women want to be part of such life, and they are immoral; such beliefs lead to stigmatization (Dahal et al., 2015; Cunningham & DeMarni Cromer, 2016). This is concerning because exposure to stigmatization can increase the sense of isolation experienced by victims, further limit their sources of support, and prevent their escape. As participants experienced a rejection from society, feelings of hopelessness grew. From participants' narratives, it seemed that social stigma blinded the society, decreased society's desire to help, and promoted bystander behaviors. On the other hand, when prostitution is not legalized additional issues are confronted as victims fear police officials due to their legal status in the country and lack of human rights and policies in place (Lloyd, 2011).

Clinical Implications

The themes of this study may be useful for professionals who work with survivors of sex trafficking and help them with reintegration. Prior to working with this population, it will be critical that clinicians engage in self-of-the-therapist work that focuses on examining their own perceptions of victims of sex trafficking. Research on other marginalized populations (e.g., overweight) indicates that experiences of stigma or discrimination may result in avoiding seeing professionals for health-related issues (Puhl & Brownell, 2007). Thus, practicing clinicians must be aware of their biases about this population and recognize how such beliefs will impact the therapeutic relationship and potentially harm the client. Clinicians should reflect on the following questions "What are the factors that put individuals at risk for becoming victims of sex trafficking?" "What challenges do victims face when trying to exit the industry?" and, "What are the common experiences that victims have in the industry?"

Clinicians are not the only ones who may be negatively influenced by the stigmatization of sex workers. The results of this study indicate that survivors internalize negative views of their experiences. This type of attached stigma to sex industry workers may be an obstacle for effective reintegration to a community, and a barrier for successful treatment outcomes. It is important that clinicians help survivors explore the meaning they attach to being in the sex trafficking industry, carefully listening for ways that society's negative view of sex trafficking may influence their sense of self. It is essential that clinicians understand the stigma as part of

a survivor's social context, as well as labels society may attach to the survivors. Finally, when connecting survivors to community resources it will be important that clinicians explore whether fear of discrimination will be a barrier to utilizing these resources.

In addition to the concerns of societal stigma, sex trafficking survivors in this study also discussed their perception of men in power, and their frustrations with the legal system. Together, these subthemes draw attention to the victim's experiences of feeling powerless. Clinicians may find that the application of a theory of therapy that focuses on power dynamics and social issues, such as Narrative Therapy (White, 2007) or Feminist Theory (Hare-Mustin, 1978), can help to reduce the inherent power imbalance between client and clinician, address socio-cultural issues overtly, and provide the space to empower the client. For example, applying Narrative Therapy can help clients to challenge the stigmatizing views that are held by western societies (i.e., sex workers are immoral) and support clients to challenge the ways this dominant discourse is influencing their narrative (White, 2007). The clinician can help the client to challenge the "thin" story about being in the sex trafficking industry to recognize this view of self was shaped by the interactions with pimps, traffickers, and customers who benefited from their low sense of self-worth. From here the clinician would work with the survivor to identify alternatives to this problem saturated story of self.

One of the most important parts of reintegration in the community and survivors' lives, after exiting the sex industry, involves addressing the impact of experienced trauma. Researchers agree that victims of sex trafficking experience complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Wilson & Butler, 2014). The results of this study indicate a range of negative experiences and clinicians working with this population must be familiar with the psychological and physical health outcomes associated with PTSD to develop an appropriate treatment plan. The clinician should be able to properly assess for and diagnosis PTSD and substance use disorders and understand how trauma experiences shape a victim's ability to share their story. Trauma survivors may lack effective coping techniques, may be impulsive, have a range of somatic concerns, and struggle to manage feeling of shame, guilt, and their self-worth (Courtois, 2004). It is essential for therapists to allow survivors to take a lead in the therapy process, especially since they were limited and restricted to make decisions and have a voice while in the industry. Clinicians should also stay up to date on recommended treatment methods. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on effective treatment models for women who exit sex trafficking (Dalla, 2006; Wilson & Butler, 2014)

Being mistreated by men and men being primary perpetrators in the sex industry can lead survivors to viewing men as dangerous, deceiving, violent, and exploitative. These views may have a significant impact on survivors' ability to establish healthy intimate relationships based on trust. Working with survivors regarding their views on and relationships with males is not only important in order for survivors to be able to build healthy relationships with males, but also to prevent them from re-experiencing trauma. Therapy focused on survivors' perceptions of and relationship with men can allow survivors to express disappointment and anger related to men, share fears of potential relationships, work on trauma and prevention of re-experiencing it in future interactions with men, and work on hopes and desires for future relationships with men.

Finally, as progress is made in empowering the survivors and addressing the trauma, based on the theme "finding purpose in life," survivors may benefit from having an opportunity to explore what they hope to do with their lives now that they are free from the trafficking industry. Treatment can progress to helping the survivor explore what they would like their future to look like. This may communicate to the survivor that they are now in charge of their future and not only do they have control over it, but a range of choices and possibilities. Many of the participants in this study described their desire to help others, which most frequently were other women who were trying to leave the industry. Clinicians should carefully consider

how working with other victims may potentially be a trigger for the survivor, but also explore with the survivor how such actions may help them find healing and purpose. Advocacy work may help them to find connection to others and create a new meaning about their past.

Limitations

While this study offers insight into the experiences of sex trafficking survivors, there are some limitations to this study. First, given that online data was used in this study, the researchers were unable to interact with the participants and such interactions could have provided more depth and understanding of the participants' experiences. Therefore, the researchers were limited in their ability to ask clarifying or follow up questions and were unable to use member checking to assess the validity of the final themes. Next, the data were collected for equalitynow.org webpage, an organization that advocates for females in the human trafficking industry. The participants were females who were contacted by organizations while in the sex industry or who were currently active in the organizations. Therefore, the data represents females who have a connection with advocacy organizations and may not represent the experiences of all victims of the sex trafficking industry. This introduces the issue of sampling bias. Further, beyond gender identity, the only other demographic information equalitynow.org posted was country of origin, which limits what is known about participants' demographic information.

A final limitation is related to not being involved in the collection of the stories; the researchers lack information about sampling and data collection. Thus, how participants were recruited or the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation is unknown. Additionally, being unaware of the research procedures means the researchers do not know how participants shared their story (e.g., interviewed, journals, use of prompts), which would influence the stories of the participants. The researchers do know that the survivors' stories were edited for length and clarity and translated from the survivors' original language; therefore, another potential limitation is that some meaningful information could have been lost.

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