International Human Trafficking and Mental Health

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“Mary”

• Composite story of cisgender woman living with CPTSD, internationally trafficked, layers of traumatic experiences
• Post-liberation, Mary feels abrasive and defensive, minimizes and represses memories of physical and emotional abuse despite acknowledgement of “flashbacks” and night terrors
• Mary holds competing beliefs about herself – good daughter / bad daughter; her situation is her fault / people chose to harm her; entitled /underserving; has choices / has no choices; trusts no one / trusts everyone (lack of boundaries)
• Mary is vulnerable; unsteady with regard to self-worth/sense of self; uncertain with regard to her capacity to thrive
Trafficked Persons at “Post-Liberation” (Basu 2009)

Physical
- Pregnancy
- Hair Loss
- Dental issues
- Back Problems
- Severe Headaches
- Thyroid
- STIs
- TB

Psychological
- PTSD
- Depression
- Trauma
- Other negative impacts from physical abuse, sexual assault and torture

Behavioral
- Fear and mistrust
- Conflict & denial (some related to traffickers, etc.)
- Unable to name the victimization
- Self-isolation
- Self-blame
Cortois (2004)

"Complex traumatic events and experiences can be defined as stressors that are:

(1) repetitive, prolonged, or cumulative,

(2) most often interpersonal, involving direct harm, exploitation, and maltreatment including neglect/abandonment/antipathy by primary caregivers or other ostensibly responsible adults,

(3) often occur at developmentally vulnerable times in the victim’s life, especially in early childhood or adolescence, but can also occur later in life."

(See also: Judith Hermann, 1992)
Complex PTSD

• Chronic or long term exposure to trauma
• Not one incident, but multiple layers of traumatic experiences
• No control or choice or options for escape from traumatic situation/s
• Forced, coerced, captive, without freedom
• Note: Some survivors of HT have also experienced childhood abuse and neglect, but not all
Impacts of CPTSD

- Instability ➔ bio-psycho-social-cultural
- Struggling with confusion, feeling unsafe, “trapped”
- Fear, anxiety, hyperarousal
- Difficulty regulating emotions, amygdala hijacking
- Dissociation, manipulated reality
- Difficulty developing healthy coping, locating and believing in resilience
- Filled with mistrust, feeling vulnerable
- Somatic reactions, physical illness
CPTSD or....?

Sometimes CPTSD presents and is thought to be:
- A personality disorder ("borderline")
- Bipolar
- ADHD
- General anxiety disorder (GAD)
- Co-occurring, e.g., with ADHD, with bipolar, with substance abuse, with dissociative identity disorder (DID)
- Not included as a diagnosis in DSM V; PTSD now includes complex (e.g., hyperarousal – aggressive, reckless, self destructive behavior; dissociation)
Environment

• Impacts of social identity in a threatening environment
• Social-political environment
  • Racism
  • Anti-immigrant beliefs, xenophobia
  • Criminalization
• Loss of culture, connection to community
• Historical trauma, Intergenerational trauma
• Systems/Institutional barriers to well-being, positive health outcomes
Impact on Trafficked Persons

FEAR
Threats, emotional/psychological abuse, fear of physical harm or death, fear of harm coming to loved ones, often prevent trafficked persons from leaving the situation.

UNAWARE
Lack of awareness regarding their rights as workers and visitors to the U.S.

INSTITUTIONAL OPPRESSION--DEBT
Some are workers who are indebted to their employers in some way, seeing themselves stuck in unpaid/unjust pay contracts w/other access to employment.

(LOSS OF) CHOICE
Some trafficked persons might not identify themselves as “victims”, but may be in indentured servitude/indebtedness, e.g. sex workers, "contract" laborers, extended family, etc.
Social Justice Theory - Framing “Victimization”

**INSTITUTIONALIZED OPPRESSION**
- Victim blaming, stereotyping, other forms of systematic oppression by institutions
- Sense of isolation and fear preventing help seeking

**FEAR**
- Discourse on “immigration” / “homeland security”
- Atmosphere of fear and mistrust prevents help seeking

**TRAFFICKED PERSON**

**UNAWARE**
- Regarding impacts of “illegal alien” vs. “trafficked person” by law enforcement and general public,
- Lack of compassion re: victimization and survival

**LIMITING CHOICES**
- “Savior” responses and conflation of "trafficking for sex" with "trafficking"
- Lack of comprehensive responses to all forms of human trafficking
Potential Trauma-Focused Therapies

ARC
• Attachment (caring community/network of providers and services)
• (self-) Regulation
• Competency (towards coping skills and accessing resilience)

Cognitive Behavioral
• CBT; DBT (SP) – includes mindfulness (Linehan)

Addressing “soul wounding” (Duran)
• Explore historical trauma experienced by family and self layer in
genogramatic activities, layer in evidence of resilience through
narrative (Timbang)
Resources – Trauma Therapy

http://www.kcsarc.org/therapy

http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/services-all.html#counseling


http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/services-all.html#counseling

http://www.cttntraumatraining.org/