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SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, TRAUMA AND ATTACHMENT:

Implications for Community-Based Social Work

Exploitation sexuelle, traumatisme et attachement: les implications pour le travail social communautaire

UN RÉSUMÉ EXÉCUTIF EN FRANÇAIS EST DISPONIBLE À LA FIN DU DOCUMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual exploitation of youth and young adults is a growing global concern. Although difficult to measure, Estes and Weiner's (2002) report on the commercial sexual exploitation of children states that an estimated 244,000 North American youth aged 10 to 17 are at risk of sexual exploitation over the course of one year. Defined as a form of human trafficking, sexual exploitation is the process through which young individuals (often victims of child physical and sexual abuse) are forced or manipulated into taking part in various sexual acts, including pornography, physical and sexual abuse, for financial gain (Hampton and Lieggi, 2017). It should be noted that this review concerns sexual exploitation and not sex work. The two are fundamentally different in that sexual exploitation involves involuntary acts and is a violation of human rights. Conversely, sex work is a line of work that, while posing safety and health risks to sex workers, is ultimately voluntary. Sex work occurs when individuals consensually agree to the sale of sex, without force or coercion, usually for the purpose of financial gain. In its truest form, sex work does not violate individuals' human rights. However, sex trafficking and sex work are best viewed as opposite ends of a spectrum, with no clear line demarcating the two (Butcher, 2003, Stop the Traffik, 2017). In this paper, we provide a brief summary of literature on the topics of trauma and attachment as they relate to sexual exploitation of youth and young adults. This knowledge synthesis product was developed through a collaborative project involving members of the Blue Door Program of the Thrive Community Youth Network and academic partners at the Memorial University School of Social Work, both located in St. John's, NL

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(for project description see, <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Undergraduate-student-papers-refined-and-presented-at-Exchange-2018-conference-Highlights-ongoing-partnership-between-academia-and-community-organizations>). We specifically sought to integrate scholarly research findings on trauma and attachment with the personal accounts of helping professionals and people with experiences of sexual exploitation. The ultimate goal was to draw practical implications for community-based organizations. We don't claim to have conducted an exhaustive examination of scholarship on attachment and trauma, nor do we suggest that these are the only considerations for policy and practice. Nevertheless, this review has led us to better understand some key issues and to forward some considerations for working with and supporting youth and young adults who have been sexually exploited.

Sexual Trauma and Manipulation

Trauma is the “state of disruption” caused by unexpected negative events and stressors severe enough that an individual couldn’t have been adequately prepared, and which could threaten the individual’s life (Valent, P., 2012, p. 678; Manitoba Trauma Information & Education Centre, 2013). In its simplest form, trauma is “the area between catastrophe and death” (Valent, P., 2019, p. 676). Experiences of trauma can have significant long-term consequences for survivors, including flashbacks/intrusive thoughts, mental illness, and self-destructiveness. The effects of trauma are highly individualized, and factors such as age, cognitive development, the nature of the traumatic event(s) and personal factors (e.g. coping strategies, emotional well-being and the availability of formal and informal support systems) all affect how an individual experiences and is impacted by trauma (Manitoba Trauma and Education Centre, 2013). Sexual trauma is a specific form of injury, which is caused by incest, molestation (often referred to as child sexual abuse), rape and self-inflicted injuries. Sexual trauma is distinguished by the causative factor of aggression of one individual toward another, for any variety of reasons (Keyes, B., 2012)



Trauma is an important predictor of future negative sexual experiences (Abromovich, 2005; Senn, Carey, & Venable, 2008). In recent research, it was found that individuals who have experienced major trauma are more likely to be involved in the sex trade. In particular, sexual trauma/abuse, as well as family dysfunction are predictive of future sexual exploitation (Lutnick et al., 2015; Menaker, 2014). The traumatic symptoms of survivors are typically amplified as a result of experiences of sexual exploitation. Analyzing survivors’ stories of denigration, manipulation, and control, Farley (2003) compares the experiences of individuals who are sexually exploited to experiences of torture and brainwashing (p. xiv). Becoming increasingly under the control of their pimps/captors, survivors progressively lose their sense of identity (Farley, 2003; Raghavan and Doychak, 2015). In a memoir, Stevens (2017) describes being brainwashed and sexually exploited as a child by her stepfather, leaving her susceptible to later exploitation. Remarking similarities in the actions of abusers, sadists, and pimps, she describes this brainwashing as a mixture of “violence, terror, degradation, and occasional small kindnesses” (p. 38), a process that convinces the victim that they are worthless and renders them unable to flee.

Attachment

Attachment can be defined as both (1) the bond between a child and their caregiver(s), and (2) the internal template (or attachment style) that forms as a result of this bond (Grinnell, 2016). There are two broad categories of attachment styles, secure and insecure, with the latter further divided into different subtypes, (e.g., avoidant, anxious/insecure, disorganized...).



Proponents of attachment theory contend that attachment styles develop very early in life and determine future relationship patterns. Children are likely to develop a secure attachment in environments where caregivers respond affectionately and in a timely manner to their distress. This secure attachment template encourages the formation of trusting adult relationships. Conversely, when responses from caregivers are delayed, inconsistent, hostile and/or indifferent, children have a higher likelihood of developing insecure attachments. Later in life, they are vulnerable (but not destined) to different kinds of relationship issues, including sexual exploitation.

The tendency for children and adults to form attachments can be considered an innate or “hard-wired” survival strategy (Daniel, 2006, p. 969). They form within the context of all significant relationships (e.g., partnerships, parent-child), even if these involve severe abuse, neglect, and exploitation. In abusive environments, children or adults will make accommodations so as to form whatever attachment that is possible. This results in the formation of attachment styles that, to an outsider, might seem counterproductive to human growth and well being. However, to those in abusive relationships, their attachment style helps maintain the relationship, thereby allowing them to fulfil innate social needs. They also help preserve their worldviews, as people generally engage in relationships with individuals who confirm their beliefs and past experiences of attachment in close romantic

and non-romantic (parental) relationships. Individuals who demonstrate insecure attachment styles, and who have experienced “cold” parenting during childhood and/or have been victimized in abusive relationships are more likely to enter into relationships with other insecure individuals in the future, as these individuals match the victim’s “mental model of relationships” (Frazier, Fischer, Wright & Debord, 1996, p. 134).

Attachment theory has been used to explain how specific early childhood environments render individuals susceptible to sexual exploitation and related issues. In a meta-analysis of eleven studies about attachment style and sexual coercion in relationships (Karantza, McCabe, Karantzas, Pizzirani, Campbell, & Mullins, 2014), the sub-category found to be most associated with sexual exploitation was anxious/insecure attachment. This style is characterized by an insatiable need for approval, sensitivity to threats of abandonment, and fear of rejection. Due to these traits, people with anxious/insecure attachment can become excessively compliant in sexual relationships and tend to downplay issues of consent. Consequently, they become targets for pimps, abusers and other predatory individuals. This attachment style was found to be more common in female-identifying individuals, a group that faces the majority of sexual exploitation.

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Trauma-Bonding

Trauma bonding (or trauma-coerced attachment) is a linking concept for the topics of attachment and trauma as they relate to sexual exploitation. It is defined as a “dynamic, cyclical state in which victims form a powerful emotional attachment” to an abuser (Raghavan and Doychak, 2015, p. 583). Trauma bonding usually involves intentionality, as the abuser seeks to dominate the relationship by exploiting vulnerabilities and power imbalances, for the purposes manipulating and controlling the victim (Saunders & Edelson, 1999). Trauma-bonding occurs over time, when victims are intermittently exposed to “power them imbalances and intermittent good-bad treatment” (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 105), which leaves victim experiencing a mixture of having their basic needs being met and being threatened by their abuser. Oftentimes, victims experience social isolation. They have a history of relationships that are characterized by mistrust and betrayal and abusers tend to discourage affiliations with outside social groups (Raghavan and Doychak, 2015). Because trauma-bonds are marked not only by control/dependency of victims on their abusers but also by love and affection, individuals who are sexually exploited often face internal struggles and self-doubt in their attempts to be free of exploitation. It is not unusual for them to feel uncertainty and grief in their decision to leave an exploiter with whom a trauma bond has been formed.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Individuals who are sexually exploited often struggle with complex trauma. For many, their vulnerability to exploitation can be connected to an insecure/anxious attachment style, which formed as a result of absent/harsh early life relationships, childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse, and other adversities. Because trauma and insecure attachment are deeply embedded issues, practitioners must accept that their efforts to form therapeutic relationships and promote change might be initially met with resistance or feigned compliance. Moreover, those exposed to complex trauma may have difficulty trusting others, an

issue described by Dittmann & Jensen (2014) as the “fractured protective shield” (p. 1222). Hence, it cannot be assumed that individuals seeking assistance will trust the “good intentions” of helping professionals.

- ✓ Cognizant of these issues, staff at Blue Door program emphasize certain principles when working with sexually exploited young people:
 - (1) meet clients where they are (i.e., accept that they may not be ready to leave their situation)
 - (2) prioritize trust and relationship-building, and
 - (3) let the clients set the pace and
 - (4) how they will work together (Coleman, n.d).
- ✓ Professionals need to remain open-minded and show unconditional positive regard for and acceptance of clients and their histories. This can prove challenging if, for example, the client initially describes positive elements in the relationships that they have had with their abusers or pimps, as a result of trauma bonding.
- ✓ Clients might demonstrate unusual patterns of behavior and emotional expression. Professionals need to exercise patience and comprehend that these are typically rooted in lifelong experiences of trauma and exploitation.
- ✓ Professionals should also reflect on their own biases toward sex work, sexual exploitation, and victimization, and work through thoughts and feelings that are counter-productive to developing a constructive helping relationship.

Given the challenges described above, service organizations need to carefully consider their staffing. Administrators of The Blue Door Program favour the hiring of people with lived experiences and practitioners who have experience working with this population. This reflects, perhaps, a belief that having an inside understanding of clients might be just as important (if not more so) than the mastery of therapeutic techniques and practice models. Administrators also recognize the importance of involving people with lived experience of sexual exploitation in program and policy development.

Trauma focused therapies are recommended for helping clients work through traumatic disorders and related issues. Cohen et al. (2012) describes a cognitive behavioral program that includes a stabilization phase that focuses on enduring safety and building coping and relaxation skills, a trauma processing phase, and an integration phase for consolidating learning and planning for the future. This model seems to align well with the evolving needs and challenges of young people seeking to exit situations of sexual exploitation.



Exiting situations of sexual exploitation is a complex undertaking that often takes several attempts. Cohen, Mannarino and Murray (2011) recommend that enhancing safety be an initial and ongoing priority. Safety plans (i.e., person to call or place to go in an emergency) are essential when beginning to work with youth who are still experiencing any degree of exploitation. Also, it would be useful for front-line professionals, such as outreach workers, to help youth to develop coping skills and strategies which they can begin using while they are still experiencing exploitation. Finally, individuals who have experienced sexual exploitation might struggle with social isolation and a lack of stable and

trusting relationships with family members (C. Coleman, Personal Communication, November 16, 2017). Consequently, professionals might need to think outside the box when helping clients build or rebuild a support network.



CONCLUSION

Among the many factors that increase risk of sexual exploitation among young people, history of trauma and insecure attachment styles emerge as important considerations (Abromovich, 2005; Senn, Carey, & Venable, 2008). Trauma-bonding creates further complications as youth who are sexually exploited often simultaneously seek safety and freedom from their pimps or perpetrators as well as experience grief and a sense of loss of the relationship when they do flee (Raghavan and Doychak, 2015). Community organizations who work with these young people need to carefully consider their organizational structure, policies and practice models. The helping process needs to be trauma-informed and gradual. It is also crucial to acknowledge that these youths are the experts of their lives, and to integrate their wisdom into planning and policy development. Finally, the safety of clients must be prioritized, as the trajectory out of situations of exploitation can be discontinuous and unpredictable.



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RÉSUMÉ EXÉCUTIF

Dans cet article, nous explorons les sujets du traumatisme et de l'attachement en lien avec l'exploitation sexuelle des jeunes et des jeunes adultes. Cette synthèse de connaissances a été élaborée en collaboration avec les membres du programme Blue Door du réseau communautaire Thrive Community Network et des partenaires universitaires de l'École de travail social de l'Université Memorial, ce programme et cette université se trouvant tous les deux à St. John's, Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador. Ce projet comportait une revue de la littérature ainsi que des observations et des témoignages personnels fournis par des professionnels aidants et des personnes ayant vécu des expériences d'exploitation sexuelle. L'objectif du projet était de combiner les conclusions de la recherche universitaire avec des témoignages personnels afin d'en dégager les implications pour la pratique et les politiques des organismes communautaires.

Le traumatisme sexuel et la manipulation

En ce qui a trait au traumatisme, et plus particulièrement le traumatisme sexuel, la recherche universitaire a conclu que l'existence d'antécédents de traumatisme sexuel est un prédicteur de future exploitation sexuelle (Lutnick et al., 2015; Menaker, 2014). De plus, l'exploitation sexuelle est une forme de traumatisme que l'on peut comparer à des lésions causées par la torture et au lavage de cerveau, et que ces lésions sont tellement omniprésentes que les victimes se trouvent dépourvues de leur sentiment d'identité (Farley, 2003; Raghavan et Doychak, 2015).

L'attachement

Le concept ou le mode d'attachement est bien établi et a fait l'objet de recherches poussées dans le cadre d'études de recherche universitaires en sciences sociales. Les êtres humains ont une tendance innée à rechercher des liens d'attachement, ce qui est nécessaire à leur survie (Daniel, 2006), et ce, malgré la possibilité des effets nuisibles que cet attachement peut infliger. Lorsqu'on considère le mode d'attachement, on remarque que les personnes qui font preuve d'un attachement anxieux ou inquiet sont plus susceptibles d'être victimes d'exploitation sexuelle.

L'attachement lié au traumatisme (*trauma-bonding*)

Le traumatisme et l'établissement d'un lien d'attachement relient entre eux les concepts du traumatisme

et de l'attachement en ce touche l'exploitation sexuelle. Ce concept combiné réfère au processus selon lequel les victimes établissent un lien puissant avec leur abuseur et à l'état d'esprit qui en résulte. Le *trauma-bonding* crée une détresse émotionnelle supplémentaire pour les victimes qui sortent d'une relation d'exploitation sexuelle.

Les implications pour les organismes communautaires

Les professionnels aidants et les organismes communautaires qui offrent des services aux personnes ayant vécu une exploitation sexuelle doivent être conscients du fait que ces personnes sont souvent aux prises avec un traumatisme complexe. Une résistance à l'égard de la création de relations et à la participation à des programmes constitue une réaction initiale que l'on trouve fréquemment, et cette attitude ne doit pas nécessairement être interprétée comme une non-observance du traitement offert. Les professionnels aidants doivent reconnaître que plusieurs tentatives peuvent être nécessaires pour sortir d'une relation d'exploitation sexuelle. Les professionnels doivent prioriser la sécurité de leurs clients clientèle et la création d'une relation personnelle quand ils commencent à travailler avec ceux-ci, et ils ne devraient pas craindre d'appliquer des idées novatrices ou originales afin de les aider dans la création et la re-création de relations de soutien informelles. Dans la mesure du possible, les professionnels devraient chercher conseil auprès de ceux qui ont déjà vécu ce type d'expérience, maximiser l'autonomie de leurs clients en les encourageant à décider eux-mêmes du rythme et des paramètres de la relation d'aide.

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