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Title:

The Key Aspects Promoting Survivor Resilience: Once I was a Victim, now I am
Free

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Abstract

When one looks at all the different components associated with resiliency, it is easy to understand that there is a lot involved in order for an individual who was trafficked to process, let alone restore, from such a traumatic event. However, resilience is key to overcoming negative experiences and aids the growth that allows one to move forward, despite adversity. Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt and recover from adversity or trauma. While this definition is typically what comes to mind when scholars think about resilience, it has been noted that outside of Western culture, resilience may require other factors to be taken into account. While one's level of resilience is partially due to personal ability and internal resources, it is also closely associated with the social context and physical resources that are available or provided. It is important to identify the factors that can promote resilience to support victims, often originating from a Western African, communitarian culture, who land up in a first world country.

This paper will focus on the outcomes of a qualitative exploration to understand what promotes resilience in survivors of human sexual trafficking, who are engaged in a support program in the Netherlands. The qualitative approach allowed us to develop detailed stories to try to understand how resilience manifested from a survivor standpoint. The outcomes of this study provide care workers with insight in how resilience is understood and experienced by survivors, as well as how it interacts with other factors in their lives.

Keywords: Resilience, sex trafficking, stressors, survivors, cultural antecedents, (re)integration, adversity, adjustment, context, structural support, mental and physical well-being

Operational Definitions:

Resilience: The ability to adapt when exposed to adversity or trauma (Ledesma, 2014).

Victim: Individuals who are still being trafficked and exploited.

Survivor: Individuals who are no longer being trafficked and are engaged in a program that aids in their recovery.

Background of Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation

It is estimated that there are roughly 4.5 million individuals who fall victim to sex trafficking world-wide, the majority of them women and children, and that approximately 500,000 new individuals are trafficked each year (Orme & Sheriff, 2015). However, other sources state that the number of individuals trafficked can be up to 27 million globally (Hodge, 2014). The human trafficking business is viewed as the second largest global criminal industry currently (Silver, Karakurt, & Boysen, 2015); it is projected to earn roughly \$30,000 per year per victim (Orme & Sheriff, 2015). Although the worldwide interest and attention toward this industry is slowly growing, this form of modern-day slavery has been impacting several countries for quite some time. Asia accounts for the most cases of human trafficking; however, in recent decades, Europe and the Middle East have experienced a huge growth in this industry (Orme & Sheriff, 2015). The main focus of this paper however, is not on the country's impact or drivers of human trafficking but rather the personal impact on victims and what helped them to survive it all. (Re)integration is one of the first steps when an individual has been identified and removed from a trafficking situation (Meshkovska, et al., 2015). This process involves "settlement in a safe and secure environment, access to a reasonable standard of living, mental and physical well-being, opportunities for personal, social and economic development and access to social and emotional support" (Meshkovska, et al., 2015, p. 390). However, even with support and resettlement, having listened to the arduous journey of victims, it is clear that the obstacles they need to overcome to reintegrate are significant. Therefore, the researchers became particularly interested in what might promote resilience for survivors of trafficking, including obstacles undocumented individuals face when on their own after they have broken away from pimps or traffickers and attempting a solo re-integration). It could have significant benefits to the reintegration of survivors of human trafficking worldwide if the drivers of resilience are identified and consciously included in non-governmental organizations (NGO), church or government support systems and intervention programs across the world.

Resilience

Resilience is key to overcoming negative experiences and begin the growth that one needs to learn to move on. While one's level of resilience is partially due to personal ability, it is also closely associated with social and physical resources that are available (Hickle, 2017). Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt when exposed to adversity or trauma (Ledesma, 2014). While this definition may be typically what comes to mind when one thinks about resilience, it has been noted

that outside of Western culture, resilience may have other layers to consider. When considering the dominant culture of one's environment, additional components matter, for example, "exposure to significant psychological, environmental or political adversity, the capacity to find health-sustaining resources; opportunities to experience well-being; and family, community and culture providing these resources in 'culturally meaningful ways'" (Gray et al., p. 364). It is particularly important to apply a cultural lens to resilience since a majority of individuals being trafficked into developed countries are from non-Western developing countries (Jones, Engstrom, Hilliard, & Sungakawan, 2011).

A helpful three-dimensional model to identify the deeper layers to resilience has been designed. The three components of this model involve:

- how quickly one recovers from stress;
- the ability to maintain self-purpose when in stressful situations
- the capacity to grow mentally (Castro & Zautra, 2016).

In other words, one's ability to develop resilience may stem from an ability to process traumatic events and the way in which the situation is viewed or perceived (Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007). When one looks at the severe impact of trafficking, it is easy to understand that there is a lot of consideration and work involved in restoring resilience for an individual who suffered from an ongoing traumatic event.

Internal factors that contribute to resilience

In this paper six internal components of resilience were explored: physical activity, mental health, emotional state, spirituality, hardiness and coping styles.

- *Physical elements of resilience* involve taking into account and implementing a healthy lifestyle with proper nutrition and plenty of sleep. These are important for one to keep a clear head and make sure that their body is being fueled properly.
- *The mental aspect* involves self-control, perspective, and one's ability to focus. This also plays a role in anticipating a stressful situation.
- *The emotional dimension* of resilience focuses on being able to identify one's emotions and work through them. When we are able to identify our emotions associated with an event, we are then able to work through them and come to a resolution. This also plays a role in keeping a realistic

optimism about ourselves.

- *Spirituality* can play a large role in helping survivors overcome their traumatic experiences. Regardless of which religion or form of spirituality is chosen by the individual, having faith in a higher power can help to build positive emotions, allowing survivors to learn forgiveness in themselves, and help to alleviate depression (Brewer-Smyth & Koenig, 2014). Additionally, spirituality can give hope and act as a shelter. One study found that although spirituality was not a protector against developing PTSD after experiencing a traumatic event, it rather served as a coping mechanism (Connor, Davidson, & Lee, 2003). It also fosters an environment which allows the growth of bonds with other individuals (Brewer-Smyth & Koenig, 2014), who may have experienced similar traumatic events. These bonds are essential as they help build a support system for the survivor.
- *Hardiness* is a definition used to describe an individual's capacity to look at the positive side of a situation even when faced with extremely difficult situations (Ledesma, 2014). There are three components that encompass hardiness: "being committed to finding meaningful purpose in life; belief that one can influence one's surroundings and the outcome of events; belief that one can learn and grow from both positive and negative life experiences" (Ledesma, 2014, p. 4). This is important when it comes to resilience as it is up to the individual to take control of the situation and try to see the positive and potential growth. In addition to all of these components, coping is essential to building and sustaining resilience.
- *Coping* is thought to be the result of a behavioral response to an event, based on one's appraisal of that situation and their belief in dealing with it (Grych, Hamby, & Banyard, 2015). Over time, one can learn to implement healthy coping skills (i.e., removing themselves from a situation to gather their thoughts) to help overcome stressful situations.

External factors that contribute to resilience

While all the components discussed above are internal drivers of resilience, another important consideration is the external factors.

Support systems such as family, friends, and also government support services are extremely important when it comes to promoting, building and sustaining resilience (Ledesma, 2014). Close personal relationships (personal networks) are considered to be a protective factor against adversity (Grych et al., 2015). These relationships generate a sense of safety and strength, which are essential to have and maintain, especially to overcome traumatic events (Suzuki, Geffner, & Bucky, 2008). One study found that having a strong support system not only provided a safe and reliable relationship with another individual, but it also allowed the exchange of ideas, beliefs, and suggestions; both of which were considered important aspects in the development of resilience (Suzuki et al., 2008). Practicing spirituality and interacting with similar spiritual practitioners also results in a strong social support system. Extrinsic support obviously also comes from any community that one belongs to, such as a religious community (Brewer-Smyth & Koenig, 2014). The interesting fact is that not only receiving support but also, in turn providing support fosters resilience. A support system provides advice, understanding, and positive influences that all contribute to an individual's resilience (Brewer-Smyth & Koenig, 2014) and also play a role in one's perception of self-worth and personal strength.

In this study the components that promote resilience for survivors of human trafficking who are engaged in a support program within the Netherlands were explored. Both internal and external factors of resilience were examined.

Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative research study that was conducted for a master's thesis at the Webster University campus in the Netherlands. The research was approved by the institutional review board of Webster St. Louis. Semi-

structured interviews were conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of how resilience is promoted and sustained by survivors of human trafficking. A survivor is someone who has broken away from pimps and traffickers and is actively trying to reintegrate into the society.

Demographic Profile of Participants

Age	Gender	Nationality	Marital Status	Children	Education	Legal Status	Government Support	Age trafficked	Date of Arrival in Netherlands
50	female	Nigerian	Widow	7	High School	Documented	Yes	41	2013
27	female	Nigerian	Divorced	2	Bachelor+	Undocumented	No	26	2017
44	female	Nigerian	Married	1	High School	Undocumented	No	19	2011

Table 1: Demographics of the survivors interviewed.

Themes that emerged in the Interviews

A cross-case analysis examines the two main themes distinguished by the design of the interview: external factors that contribute to resilience and internal factors that contribute to resilience.

Themes	Frequency	Themes	Frequency
<u>External Factors that Contribute</u>		<u>Internal Factors that Contribute</u>	
Support System	21	Physical Activity	8
Government Support	2	Spirituality	19
NGO Support	6	Coping Styles	6
		Hardiness	5
		Mental Health	22
		Emotional State	13

Table 2: Table of themes and frequency from interviews.

External factors that contribute to resilience

External factors that contribute to resilience are defined as any outside influences that provide relief from the stress an individual is experiencing. These factors were identified in two main categories: support systems and the influence of the government and/or the support program (NGO) that the women were involved with in the Netherlands.

Support systems are defined in two ways: providing support to others and receiving support from others.

“Sometimes I go to sister B because she is similar to me and she give me some good advice. I talk to her sometimes...it makes me feel good (when she comes to me for advice), because I try to tell her and remind her of something she told me when, and I tell her you have to do the same thing because it helped me. So, it will help you too.” (06)

All of the women interviewed were actively involved in an NGO in the Netherlands designed to help them to reestablish their lives and provide guidance and support.

“After the death of my brother. I met Pastor T and S. So, I give my story and Pastor T advise me to go to police so I went there and I give my story to them. That is why, I got a lawyer, they take the case.” (01)

In addition, one of the survivors interviewed had just gained a five-year residency permit from the Dutch government, which came with some support.

“the first time, they give me one year a stay permit. Where you need to find him, but they could not find my trafficker. After court, they gave me a pardon. They give me 5 years, I got a house now, the Netherlands government is going to help me to buy things for the house.” (01)

Internal factors that contribute to resilience

Internal factors are defined as different components one may rely on or utilize in order to help promote personal strength. These factors are organized into six categories: physical activity, spirituality, coping styles, hardiness, mental health, and emotional state.

Physical activity refers to any exercise resulting from their daily routine or as a way to relieve stress.

“I walk a lot, every day... I walk maybe 30 minutes one hour a day. I do that every day.” (01)

Spirituality is defined as having any personal belief in a higher power.

“I am Christian...God saved me from them. That’s why I say, it is when I got here I have the courage. I was safe...God will help in any way.” (02)

Coping styles are defined as different tools or techniques that may be executed to help an individual calm down in stressful situations.

“the only thing I do, I think about not getting sick. So that I can live longer to enjoy the fruit of my labor. When my son gets married and has his own children. I always think about that... I always think that when you are under too much stress, your brain and everything can’t work and you don’t know if you can survive it or not. I just try to calm myself down.” (06)

Hardiness is defined as an individual’s capacity to look at the positive side of extremely difficult situations. The following quote is an example of how one of the woman took the negative events of their past and turn it into a positive outcome. Hardiness is especially evident in the women’s ability to understand their personal strength.

“I am strong now. I treat myself like a man, because I am the only one for my children and I am taking good care of them. So, I don’t think there anything

that is more difficult as the past. I know now that I have passed through a lot and there is a very difficult time for me, so there is nothing that will make it bigger than that or more difficult than that.” (01)

Mental health incorporates self-control, perspective, one’s ability to focus and their motivation to continue. The following quote provides insight into the motivation to continue and not give up and on the future.

“very hopeful. I am hopeful for the future because I believe that I’m still young, that I can still make it. I believe that I have a son here that will make a bright future... When I think about my son, he keeps me going.” (06)

Emotional state is defined as the ability one has to identify their emotions in a certain situation and work through them. This is particularly important in identifying different aspects that bring joy and happiness to one’s life.

“watching him growing up, very tall. My son makes me very happy.” (06)

Discussion

This qualitative study examined different components, both external and internal, that contribute to the promotion and sustainability of resilience among survivors of human trafficking, specifically for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The study was designed to identify several themes within each category. While it is important to consider all of the different components involved in both the external and internal contributors of resilience, several themes were represented more frequently than others. In terms of internal factors, spirituality and mental health produced the highest frequency in the interviews with survivors. The findings associated with spirituality and coping relates to another study that found that utilizing one’s spiritual beliefs has a positive effect on one’s mental health (Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007). It is believed that mental health scored high on frequency because it was also associated with the survivors’ perception of the future and their motivation to continue. One studied looked at the importance of attaching meaning to a difficult situation as a way to make sense of it (Grych,

Hamby, & Banyard, 2015). The outcomes of attaching meaning to events can help to define the person as a whole and give them a sense of purpose and drive (Grych, Hamby, & Banyard, 2015). This was similar to the findings of this study. The survivors all stated that as a result of being trafficked and subjected to different forms of abuse, that they are now stronger than ever and can accomplish anything. They view their past as a motivation to continue into the future and believe that nothing can stop them.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some possible limitations to consider. The first involves the country of origin of the survivors that were interviewed. All of the women were from Africa, specifically Nigeria. There were cultural aspects of this that were not addressed in the interview. Future research might want to incorporate cultural aspects to a targeted population, which could provide more insight into the different drivers of resilience.

Except for one of the survivors, all individuals were undocumented. This potentially limits the scope of how different components help to promote resilience. It would be of interest to have a mixed pool of survivors, documented and undocumented, in order to see if there are similarities or difference in regards to resilience development. In addition, having a mixed pool of survivors from different NGO's might provide more knowledge on ways to help promote resilience from an organizational standpoint.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to both external and internal drivers that help to promote resilience in survivors of human trafficking. Resilience is an extremely important element to overcoming severe trauma and understanding the nature of it and ways to help foster its growth is a key step to helping individuals on their road to recovery.

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