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Navigating Covert Exploitation: Treatment Considerations for Counseling Human Trafficking Survivors

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Navigating Covert Exploitation: Treatment Considerations
for Counseling Human Trafficking Survivors

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requirements for the Master of Science Degree in
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Navigating Covert Exploitation: Treatment Considerations
for Counseling Human Trafficking Survivors

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of
Lindsey Holper

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project
Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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Abstract

Human trafficking is a pervasive form of modern-day slavery. Despite increased resources being devoted to fighting these atrocities, human trafficking numbers are rising (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). Unfortunately, due to the covert, criminal nature of exploitation, research regarding human trafficking and its impact on survivors has been limited. This literature review seeks to aid mental health counselors in their treatment of human trafficking survivors by garnering an understanding of the complex mental health needs of trafficking survivors by exploring biological, genetic, and psychosocial influences that increase their susceptibility to the development of mental health concerns. This review also aims to identify the most prevalent mental health concerns of survivors. A discussion regarding the relevancy of findings, how they may guide treatment in the field of mental health counseling, research limitations, and advocacy needs follows.

Keywords: human trafficking, exploitation, counseling, treatment considerations, psychological implications

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Navigating Covert Exploitation: Treatment Considerations for Counseling Human Trafficking Survivors

Human trafficking is a global and pervasive form of modern-day slavery defined by The United States Department of Justice (2020) as a crime involving the exploitation of humans for labor, commercial sex, or other services through the use of force, coercion, or fraud. Human trafficking is comprised of two predominant forms of trafficking including sex trafficking, in which traffickers induce the trafficked to sell sex, and labor trafficking, in which traffickers induce the trafficked to work or provide services (Polaris Project, 2022).

Despite increased resources being devoted to fighting these global atrocities, human trafficking numbers are rising (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018) and the psychological repercussions of exploitation are becoming increasingly evident (Muftić & Finn, 2013). In response, mental health counselors must be adequately equipped to treat these exceptionally vulnerable populations who commonly experience a multitude of mental health concerns post trafficking (Cook et al., 2018). Unfortunately, due to the clandestine, criminal nature of exploitation, research focusing on the mental health needs of human trafficking survivors is scarce. This literature review seeks to aid mental health counselors in their treatment of human trafficking survivors by garnering an understanding of the complex mental health needs of trafficking survivors by exploring biological, genetic, and psychosocial influences that increase their susceptibility to the development of mental health concerns. This review also aims to identify the most prevalent mental health concerns of human trafficking survivors. By acquiring an understanding of the predominant mental health concerns of trafficked populations, mental health counselors will be better prepared to deliver mental health care to trafficking survivors.

Review of Literature

Existing literature suggests that human trafficking is quickly becoming one of the fastest growing forms of organized crime (Stotts & Ramey, 2009) and its victims are generating the trafficking industry billions of dollars in revenue each year (Tiller & Reynolds, 2020), with sex trafficking alone bringing in approximately 32 billion dollars annually (Litam, 2019). While the covert, criminal nature and global scale of human trafficking makes determining the exact prevalence of trafficking impossible, experts have utilized a variety of research methodologies to examine the prevalence of trafficking. Although estimates vary, recent studies indicate that approximately 27 million people worldwide are impacted by human trafficking exploitation annually, with 4.5 million of those being victims of sexual exploitation (Litam, 2017). Approximately 1.9 million of those sex trafficking victims are believed to be children (Kenny et al., 2019).

As human trafficking numbers rise, so too does the likelihood that mental health counselors will encounter clients in their practice who are at an increased risk of being trafficked, currently being trafficked, or who have a history of being trafficked. Findings from a 2013 study conducted by Muftić and Finn support this notion. Muftić and Finn (2013) surveyed survivors of human sex trafficking and found that a majority of survivors indicated they experienced at least one mental health problem post trafficking. Thus, research indicates that there are approximately 27 million people worldwide impacted by human trafficking (Litam, 2017), a majority of which will experience at least one mental health problem post trafficking (Muftić & Finn, 2013). These findings are not only alarming, but spark an important question: why are survivors of human trafficking at an increased risk of developing mental health concerns? A review of current literature suggests that there may be biological, genetic, and psychosocial influences that

increase human trafficking survivors' susceptibility to the development of mental health disorders (MacDuffie & Strauman, 2017).

Biological, Genetic, and Psychosocial Influences on the Development of Mental Disorders

Biological Influences

Over the course of the past two decades, researchers have largely accepted the belief that mental health disorders stem from biological roots and that they are the result of a disease of the brain (MacDuffie & Strauman, 2017). Researchers examining influences on the development of mental health disorders within human trafficking survivors acknowledge this stance, indicating that there are a variety of biological factors which influence the development of mental health concerns in trafficked populations (Levine & Schumacher, 2017).

Literature investigating the biological influences on the development of mental health disorders suggests that prolonged exposure to heightened levels of psychological stress is associated with distinct structural changes in the brain (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). Human trafficking victims are subject to prolonged exposures to heightened levels of psychological stress in a myriad of ways. Whether trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation or labor exploitation, victims are regularly subjected to dangerous and unsafe conditions which pose serious health and safety risks (Stotts & Ramey, 2009). Human trafficking victims frequently face physical imprisonment and isolation (Dahal et al., 2015) and are commonly subjected to recurrent, violent assaults resulting in bruising, burns, cuts, broken teeth, blunt force trauma, and fractures (Eccleston, 2013; Levine & Schumacher, 2017). Thus, the inherently exploitative and abusive nature of trafficking, which directly exposes victims to heightened levels of psychological stress, can alter the structure of a victim's brain, resulting in an increased vulnerability to the development of mental health disorders.

Chronic exposures to stress have also been shown to result in a release of excess glucocorticoids in the brain which can negatively impact the body and mind, resulting in an increased vulnerability to the development of mental health disorders (Cattane et al., 2017). Neuroplasticity, the brain mechanisms that impact an individual's ability to perceive, adapt, respond to, and cope with a variety of factors may be negatively affected by prolonged exposures to stress (Cattane et al., 2017) resulting in an impaired ability to respond to and cope with subsequent stressors (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). As a result, trafficking survivors may not only be more susceptible to developing mental health concerns due to biological factors, but they subsequently may be biologically less equipped to successfully navigate and cope with stress post trafficking (Cattane et al., 2017; Levine & Schumacher, 2017).

Genetic Influences

Genetic factors may also influence the development of mental health disorders in trafficking survivors (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). No known studies examining specific genetic correlations associated with human trafficking and the development of mental health disorders have been conducted as of the time of this review, so exact genetic correlations remain unknown (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). It is of note, however, that traffickers tend to prey on vulnerable populations which may include victims who have a family history of mental health disorders (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). These genetic factors may predispose trafficking victims to be more likely to develop mental health disorders themselves, especially in response to prolonged exposures to the innumerable stressors associated with being trafficked (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). Further research into genetic factors that influence the development of mental health concerns could be beneficial to the field of counseling and could potentially aid in future prevention efforts.

Psychosocial Influences

Numerous psychosocial factors have been found to influence the likelihood that an individual will experience mental health concerns (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). A review of existing research, however, suggests that there may be a distinct overlap between the psychosocial factors that predispose trafficking victims to an increased susceptibility to experiencing mental health concerns and the psychosocial factors that predispose victims to being trafficked in the first place (Levine & Schumacher, 2017).

Although young women make up a large percentage of human sex trafficking victims (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, 2018), traffickers target individuals across all geographic, socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. There are distinct factors that have been identified that put individuals at a significantly increased risk of being trafficked, however. Traffickers tend to prey on vulnerable populations who traditionally have access to fewer resources, thus making it easier to exploit their victims without detection or fear of escape (Tiller & Reynolds, 2020). Although individual risk factors do not solely contribute to vulnerable populations being trafficked, it is important to note that a combination of vulnerabilities may increase the chances of being targeted by traffickers (Fedina & Williamson, 2019).

Research indicates that vulnerable populations at an increased risk of being trafficked include people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, undocumented immigrants, people living in poverty, and people with a history of neglect, abuse, or maltreatment (Polaris Project, 2022). Findings from the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2013) suggest that individuals having mental health disorders or developmental delays were also at a heightened risk of being trafficked. Living in, or having a history of living in, unstable home environments may also increase an individual's risk of being trafficked (Landers et al., 2017).

Concurrently, literature suggests that unstable living environments, poverty, migration, unemployment, and a history of abuse are psychosocial factors that have been shown to predispose an individual to being trafficked (Polaris Project, 2022) and to being more susceptible to being diagnosed with a mental health disorder (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). The overlap in findings suggests that there are distinct psychosocial factors that both increase the probability of being trafficked and the likelihood of developing mental health concerns.

Commonalities in Mental Health Concerns

While literature suggests that human trafficking survivors face an increased susceptibility to the development of mental health disorders due to an array of biological, genetic, and psychosocial factors (Levine & Schumacher, 2017), the specific psychological needs of trafficked populations have received limited research attention. Empirical research regarding the psychological consequences of human trafficking may be limited, but existing studies of human trafficking survivors suggest alarming trends in the mental health concerns of trafficked populations.

As noted, a 2013 study conducted by Muftić and Finn surveyed survivors of human sex trafficking and found that a majority of survivors indicated they experienced at least one mental health problem post trafficking. Further studies support this notion, including a study conducted by Cook et al. (2018) which reviewed the data of 184 sexually exploited youth females in a juvenile court and found that 76% of sexually exploited youth observed had at least one documented mental health problem, while 62% reported having multiple mental health problems post trafficking. Notably, 43% of participants in this study reported a history of being hospitalized for mental health problems post trafficking (Cook et al., 2018), illuminating the dire need for early and effective psychological intervention and counselor preparedness.

Despite research being limited, researchers have begun to explore and identify commonalities in specific mental health concerns experienced by human trafficking survivors. A systemic review conducted by Oram et al. (2012) identified specific mental health concerns of trafficking survivors. In their study, researchers examined 19 peer-reviewed papers on studies of sexually exploited trafficking survivors and found that, while mental health concerns varied significantly among survivors, a large number of survivors reported experiencing increased depression, anxiety, and trauma related disorders (Oram et al., 2012).

Data from a 2018 study conducted by Hopper and Gonzalez supported these findings. Hopper and Gonzalez compared the psychological evaluations of 131 domestic and foreign trafficking survivors, including 66 survivors of sex trafficking and 65 survivors of labor trafficking (2018). Their study sample was comprised of 72% female, 18% male, and 10% transgender survivors from around the world (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). The results of Hopper and Gonzalez's study supported the notion that depression and posttraumatic stress disorder were among the most common psychological concerns in their sample (2018).

Similar findings were reported in a 2014 study conducted by Lederer & Wetzel in which researchers recruited a study sample of 107 domestic, female sex trafficking survivors from the United States. In their study, Lederer & Wetzel utilized a mixed-methods research approach, using qualitative data collection from focus groups and structured interviews using quantitative analysis (2014). Results of their study indicated that 88.7% of their sample experienced depression, 76.4% experienced anxiety, 68% experienced flashbacks, 73.6% experienced nightmares, and 82.1% experienced feelings of shame or guilt (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014).

Collectively, current literature suggests that commonalities in the mental health concerns exist among trafficked populations and include depression, anxiety, trauma related disorders,

suicidality, and substance abuse (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010; Alhajji et al., 2021; Ostrovschi et al., 2011; Oram et al., 2016).

While examining the current literature, patterns in the experiences of human trafficking survivors with these mental health concerns were evident.

Depression

Current literature focusing on the mental health of human trafficking survivors indicates that depression is commonly experienced among both minors and adults (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010; Alhajji et al., 2021). As noted, Lederer & Wetzel (2014) found that, of the 107 female sex trafficking survivors surveyed in their study, 88.7% of victims reportedly indicated symptoms of depression. Symptoms of depression vary in frequency and intensity but may include a depressed mood most of the day, diminished pleasure in previously enjoyed activities, weight loss or weight gain, insomnia, fatigue, recurrent thoughts of death, or suicidal ideation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While symptoms of depression are commonly reported among trafficked individuals (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010; Alhajji et al., 2021), researchers have sought to gain clarity on the specific factors associated with higher levels of depression reported among this population.

Hossain et al. (2010) conducted a study interviewing 204 girls and women who had been trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In their study, researchers utilized subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory and Harvard Trauma Questionnaire to interview trafficking survivors and found that sexual violence and injuries experienced during trafficking were associated with higher rates of reported depression (Hossain et al., 2010). In their systemic review of studies, Oram et al. (2012) reported similar findings with higher rates of depression

being associated with experiences of sexual violence and injuries during trafficking. Notably, women who had been exploited sexually had an increased risk of depression compared to women who had been trafficked for labor exploitation. (Oram et al., 2012).

Studies conducted by Hossain et al. (2010) and Oram et al. (2012) concurrently found that the length of time spent in trafficking correlated with the levels of depression reported. Individuals who had been trafficked for longer periods of time tended to report higher levels of depression (Hossain et al., 2010). Alternatively, more time that had passed following their exit from trafficking was associated with lower levels of depression reported among survivors (Hossain et al., 2010).

Anxiety

Literature identifies anxiety as another significant commonality in the mental health concerns of human trafficking survivors (Oram et al. 2012; Levine & Schumacher, 2017). Lederer & Wetzel (2014) found that, of the 107 female sex trafficking survivors surveyed in their study, 76.4% of victims reportedly indicated symptoms of anxiety. Symptoms of anxiety vary but may include excessive anxiety and worry, difficulty controlling the worry, restlessness, being easily fatigued, irritability, and muscle tension (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

A 2017 study conducted by Landers et al. assessed 87 youth between 9 and 18 years of age who had been sexually exploited and met additional inclusion criteria including having had been a child in the welfare dependency program, having lived in Miami-Dade County, Florida, and who were entering post trafficking treatment. Researchers collected data by utilizing the Florida version of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths-Commercially Sexually Exploited (CANS-CSE) assessment tool and found that anxiety was not only common among minor survivors of human trafficking, but that anxiety significantly impacted the functioning of

just over half of the sexually exploited minors in the study (Landers et al., 2017). It is of note that research indicates that anxiety symptoms, similar to depressive symptoms, are reported in higher rates among survivors of sexual violence and injuries (Hossain et al., 2010; Oram et al., 2012). Length of time spent in trafficking was noted to be correlated to symptoms of anxiety reported, with survivors who had been trafficked for longer periods of time reporting higher levels of anxiety (Hossain et al., 2010).

Trauma Related Disorders

Researchers have identified that trauma related disorders, especially posttraumatic stress disorder, are common among survivors of human trafficking (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010; Alhajji et al., 2021). Symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder differ in frequency and severity but may include recurrent, involuntary, or intrusive distressing memories of trauma, recurrent, distressing dreams, dissociative reactions, flashbacks, intense or prolonged psychological distress, physiological reactions, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Ostrovski et al. (2011) conducted a longitudinal study of 120 women eighteen years of age and older who had been trafficked and were returning to Moldova. Researchers compared psychiatric diagnoses of survivors provided by a trained Moldavian psychiatrist using the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV at two points in time post trafficking, including at five days post trafficking and approximately six months post trafficking, and found that 48% of women met the diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder at five days post trafficking compared to 36% at approximately six months post trafficking (Ostrovski et al., 2011). These

findings suggest that the dramatic impact that human trafficking has on mental health is not only immediate, but long-lasting.

Suicidality

While depression, anxiety, and trauma disorders are among the most commonly identified mental health concerns in human trafficking survivors (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010; Alhajji et al., 2021), research suggests that survivors are also at an increased risk for suicidality (Codisco et al., 2022). In their study of human trafficking survivors, Lederer & Wetzel (2014) found that 41% of survivors studied indicated having attempted suicide.

A subsequent study by Oram et al. (2016) supported high rates of suicidality in human trafficking survivors. Oram et al. collected data using a cross-sectional survey of 52 men and 98 women sex trafficking survivors in England and assessed for suicidality using the Revised Clinical Interview Schedule (2016). Researchers found that, of the 150 survivors of human trafficking studied, 41% had experienced suicidal thoughts within the past week (Oram et al., 2016). The high rates of depression, anxiety, and trauma related disorders observed in human trafficking survivors (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010; Alhajji et al., 2021), may serve as risk factors for increased suicidality in addition to poverty, family conflict, violence, and homelessness which are commonly associated with trafficking and suicidality (Codisco et al., 2022).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse may impact survivors of human trafficking in a myriad of ways. In a qualitative study conducted by Rajaram & Tidball (2018), researchers utilized one-on-one, in-depth interviews with survivors of sex trafficking from the Midwest who were 19 years of age

and older and who had been at least one year post trafficking at the time of the study. Of the survivors interviewed, 59.1% identified as White-Caucasian, 9.1% identified as Latino/Hispanic, 18.2% identified as African American, and 13.6% identified as mixed race/ethnicity (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018). In their analysis of interviews, Rajaram and Tidball found that substance abuse played a unique role in many of the survivors' stories (2018). A number of survivors noted that they were forced to exchange sex in order to support the drug addictions of their friends and family (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018). Rajaram & Tidball also found commonalities related to substance abuse in human trafficking survivors in that many survivors were introduced or forced to use drugs by traffickers in order to maintain control over them, while others were sexually exploited in order to feed their own addictions (2018). Other survivors noted that they began utilizing drugs as a means to cope with the trauma of being trafficked (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018).

Applications to Clinical Mental Health Counseling

With research indicating that approximately 27 million people worldwide are impacted by human trafficking exploitation annually (Litam, 2017), a majority of which experience at least one mental health concern post trafficking (Muftić & Finn, 2013), it is likely that clinical mental health counselors will encounter survivors in their practice. Counselors must be cognizant of the biological, genetic, and psychosocial influences that contribute to an increased susceptibility to the development of mental health concerns in trafficked populations. Not only will this knowledge aid counselors in conceptualizing the cases of human trafficking survivors they work with, but this knowledge will also help counselors play an active role in developing prevention strategies that will help their clients avoid entry or re-entry into trafficking. Counselors can utilize these findings to identify individuals at an increased risk of developing mental health concerns, being trafficked, or being re-trafficked and alter their course of treatment accordingly.

The current literature identifying commonalities in the significant mental health concerns experienced by survivors as a result of trafficking illuminate the need for further advocacy efforts in the field of mental health counseling. Advocacy efforts may include the development of professional training tools illustrating the multifaceted needs of human trafficking survivors, the development of screening tools to assist counseling professionals in identifying clients who are at an increased risk of being trafficked, who are currently being trafficked, or who are at risk of re-entering trafficking, and advocacy for increased research of these vulnerable and underserved populations in order to better inform and guide counselors in their treatment efforts.

Conclusion

Current research into the mental health needs of human trafficking survivors suggests that human trafficking has dire consequences on the mental health of trafficked populations. Human trafficking survivors face an increased susceptibility to the development of mental health concerns due to a number of biological, genetic, and psychosocial factors (Levine & Schumacher, 2017). These mental health concerns vary in severity but frequently include anxiety, depression, trauma related disorders, suicidality, and substance abuse (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018; Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010; Alhajji et al., 2021; Codisco et al., 2022). These findings shed light on the most prevalent mental health concerns in human trafficking populations and call for further research into their complex needs.

Limitations and Future Research Needs

As noted, research surrounding the mental health needs of trafficked populations has historically been limited. Current research findings suggest a dire need for further research in order to gain a richer understanding of the complexities of human trafficking and to enhance

mental health counselors' understanding and ability to provide appropriate and effective treatments. Existing research has tended to focus on the experiences of female sex trafficking survivors, leaving a gap in research examining the needs of non-female identifying trafficking survivors and individuals trafficked for the purpose of labor exploitation. Future research would benefit from including a more diverse look at the mental health needs of all trafficked populations. Additionally, little research has been done examining multicultural differences in human trafficking survivors which is especially important considering the global scale of human trafficking and the moving of trafficked populations across borders.

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