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Art Therapy and Trauma: The Case of Human Trafficked Victims

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Abstract:

Management of traumatized rescued victims of human trafficking has become a challenge to the personnel of Anti-Human Trafficking Unit of the Ghana Police Service who handle victims of trauma due to trafficking. Premised on the fact that such victims do express varied trauma dispositions whiles in police facilities that required professional service of counselling to address the emotional instability caused by trauma through trafficking. This position, constrain police actions and cooperation needed from victims to have a conclusive investigation becomes a mirage. The study aimed at using Art Therapy of drawing as an intervention to mitigate the trauma experienced by these victims so as to facilitate their emotional health recovery and reintegration. Qualitative research method was used basically to gather data. Forty rescued human trafficked victims were identified and offered sessions of Art Therapy. The results revealed that art or drawing has the ability to offer a means of non-verbal communication, where verbal communication is hard or painful. Besides, the art therapy sessions enhanced the release of buried emotions which are linked to their traumatic experiences through their drawings and this quickened their emotional healing and stability.

Keywords: art therapy, human trafficking, trauma, rescued victims, warm-ups.

1. Introduction

Human trafficking issues have attracted a lot of global attention for some time now and Capobianco(2013) admits that in spite of the attention gained, it is in recent times that governments have directed significant approaches to have this alarming situation addressed by the synergy drawn from the international arena. Human trafficking is a crime in Ghana and also a violation of the human rights of victims of this crime (Act 694 of 2005; L.I. 2219 of 2015).

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017), sums up the above definition as human trafficking being the acquisition of people by inappropriate means such as force, fraud or deception, with the purpose of exploiting them. In effect, this exploitation includes sexual exploitation and abuse of vulnerable women and children and, sometimes, their forced relocation to areas where demand for their services may exist (Elias & Dermott 2008). Since human trafficking at times occurs for the reasons of sexual exploitation, a major contemporary challenge to humanity, many defenseless young women and children are sold into sexual slavery or forced to become prostitutes, either in their own countries or elsewhere in the world (Hoque, 2010).

The researchers based on prior observations had noted that victims of human trafficking had been rescued severally by the police and other organizations within the Kumasi Metropolis in Ghana. Most of the victims rescued to the police facility exhibited dispositions of trauma such as fear, anger and irritability, numbness and detachment, depression, poor concentration and memory, aches and pains, social withdrawal and isolation, confusion and forgetfulness (Herman, 1992; Terr, 1990; van der Kolk & Fislser, 1995). This was difficult for officers to handle as there were no counsellors assigned to the police unit to offer these rescued victims the needed professional assistance as required by the human trafficking laws of Ghana. Although the Criminal laws of Ghana punish criminals of this offence, it seems that not enough attention is given to ease the emotional suffering victims of human trafficking go through because of trauma. The law recommends that, these

victims be offered professional counselling services (Act 694 of 2005; L.I. 2219 of 2015) leading to reformation, self-actualization and to facilitate their reintegration back to society but this is not done.

Preliminary investigations indicated that these victims are left without professional assistance to allay the trauma they suffered in the hands of their traffickers so recidivism sets in and these rescued victims return to prostitution and other forms of social vices forced on them by their traffickers because of their lack of self-esteem and loss of identity, their lost homes and stigma suffered at the hands of the society (Owusu, 2012; Aba-Afari, 2011). The research therefore used Art Therapy as a non-verbal symbolic language to assist these traumatized victims to express their emotions and recover from their traumatic experiences subsequently.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

The study was mainly qualitative with the use of Case Study and Descriptive research methods. Data was triangulated to extract comprehensive information using interview, observation and art based assessment (Berg, 2007) The adoption of qualitative approach allowed for vivid explanation of the problems identified among the human trafficked traumatized victims, (Mariarty, 2011).

The researchers employed these tools in data collection: observation, art based assessments, and post drawing inquiry in the form of interviews. Leedy & Ormrod (2005) suggest that, in a qualitative study the researcher may use observations either as a relative outsider or as a participant observer. In this study, the latter was adopted. In the study, observations were intentionally unstructured and free-flowing and this allowed for flexibility in moving from one variable to the other as new and potentially significant object and events presented themselves. The researchers observed the varied traumatic dispositions of the rescued trafficked victims within their shattered emotional environment this way. The tool of observation also enabled the researcher gather data progressively on their emotional healing when they were offered sessions of Art Therapy. Besides, the use of art based assessment was appropriately adopted to allow for effective non-verbal communication whereas the post drawing inquiry allowed the victims to expand on the symbolic narratives they had put down in their drawings.

2.2. Identification of Rescued Traumatized Victims of Human Trafficking

The researchers identified OM Ghana an NGO within the Kumasi Metropolis where forty (40) female trafficked victims rescued from different locations dotted within Ghana, were sheltered and were going through some form of rehabilitation for possible reintegration. The accessible population identified for the study was therefore forty. These rescued traumatized victims ranged from 10 to 30 years in age but the majority of the victims, 33 of them were between 10 and 20 years while the rest were between 21 and 30 years.

The researchers interacted with these victims and observed that they exhibited varied signs of trauma as some were afraid to talk to them (strangers) and others exhibit timidity, withdrawal, restlessness, intermittent aggressiveness and inordinate behaviors (screaming, fidgeting as others were not interested), a situation that confirmed Wright (2005)'s stand that, such victims have a world that has been shrunken with remnant of fear and isolation. Drawing media (paper, crayons, color pencils, pastels, markers etc.) were provided and the environment was prepared for Art Therapy sessions to take off.

2.3. Drawings of Traumatized Victims of Human Trafficking

Efficacy of art as healing was observed when these victims (who will be referred to as clients within the art therapy context) were encouraged to express themselves artistically, in non-directed and directed ways and the outcome confirmed "art as therapy... that reconcile the external conflicts between the individual's instinctual urges and the demands of society (Kramer, 2000 p.17). At the initial session, the researchers employed a non-directed approach with the clients however, as the sessions continued subsequently, both directed and non-directed approaches were actively used. The clients were engaged in a directed approach with themes such as "Close your eyes and scribble" "Scribble and color" "Draw what you Want" "Draw what makes you afraid", they were provided with variety of drawing media and were allowed to make choices of their own. At the end of each session the victims produced art works that reflected their emotional dispositions.

3. Discussions

Warm-up sessions began every art therapy session. The aim was to settle the clients emotionally and prepare them for the actual art therapy sessions that ensued. Two of these warm up sessions will be discussed since the results from all the warm up sessions were similar. A few of the art therapy sessions that followed will be discussed as well.

3.1. Art Therapy Session One - Warm-up: Close Your Eyes and Scribble

In the first Art Therapy session, clients were observed to be very apprehensive and exhibited varied degrees of attitudinal and emotional inconsistencies due to trauma (Buchalter, 2004). Morgan et al. (2001) posited that in stressful conditions, low dissociative reactions are experienced by victims. No wonder then that they saw the researchers as intruders into their world. Some of the clients were also observed to be shocked by the intrusion of the researcher. Brewin(2003) noted

that common symptoms of trauma experienced by victims are emotional numbing, depersonalization, derealization and hallucination. To diffuse this tense environment and gain access into their world, the researchers took them through directed warm up exercises as depicted in Plates 1 to 4 which helped them to be at ease.



Figure 1: Warm Up -Close Your Eyes and Scribble Figure 2: Warm Up-Close Your Eyes and Scribble
Source: Research participant, 2016

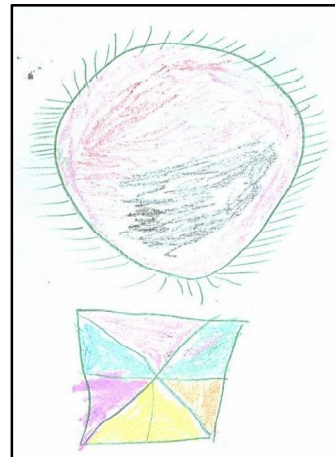
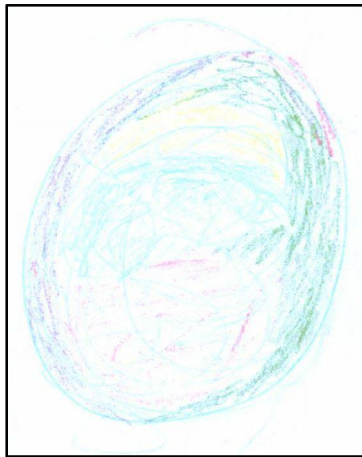


Figure 3: Warm Up: Scribble and Colour Figure 4: Warm-up: Scribble and Colour
Source: Research Participants, 2016

The observations made on the rate of release some of these clients gained at this preliminary stage of Art Therapy strengthened Naumburg (1966)'s adoption of the Freudian concept of free association where she allowed her clients to offer verbal descriptions of art spontaneously made by them. The clients' free associations became an important tool for understanding the images created in Art Therapy therefore, a pointer to their growth and change (Malchiodi, 2003). This growth and change in relation to this study was observed to be the release of their emotions on paper by means of scribbling or drawing. The researchers further observed that, these victims showed some level of stability and independence devoid of any traumatic dispositions as they spoke individually about the items identified in their respective works and the meanings associated with them. It was also noticed that hitherto, uncompromising and almost chaos atmosphere created by clients' manifestation of traumatic physiognomies changed to a rather calm one as they got deeply lost in producing the artworks; a state of flow was thus achieved. Their earlier apprehensiveness and exhibition of varied degrees of attitudinal and emotional inconsistencies due to the trauma such as their uncertainties with the intrusion of the researchers seemed settled at this point.

3.2. Art Therapy Session Two

The researchers observed that the seven minutes' warm-up exercise on the theme "Scribble and Colour" during the second session also enabled the clients to freely express themselves as shown in their art works. Prior to this, the clients were observed to be tensed almost like the very first time the researchers approached them and this was heightened by the serene nature of the therapeutic setting. Their bold choice and use of colour and rendering of work showed an improvement of their confidence level. The artworks produced at this level also seem to display a readiness for the actual session to take off. Kaplan (2000) attested that even if these art works have limited symbolic content, they still have the ability and potential to offer therapeutic release to the individual artists that made them.



Figure 5: Warm-Up: Scribble and Color



Figure 6: Warm-Up: Scribble and Color

Source: Research participants, 2016

3.3. Draw What You Want

This non-directed theme gave the clients enough room to explore their respective inner dispositions examples of which are shown in Plates 8 and 9. Since clients were not restricted to what to draw, they freely indulged in their artwork and produced drawings that reflected them. Kramer's assertion about children's drawings taking on the image of the artist when they are not restricted in the use of art materials or in this case the theme may apply in this study. Since the clients were also observed to be freely discussing their works, Kramer's theoretical stance of art as therapy where the art process contained the mysterious potential for healing that is therapy emanating from the client's creation of the art work may be of significance here (Edwards, 2014). Rubin viewpoint of artwork done in a natural artistic environment offering serenity to the soul of the sufferer and reconnect him/her back to life may buttress Kramer's assertion here (Rubin, 2010).

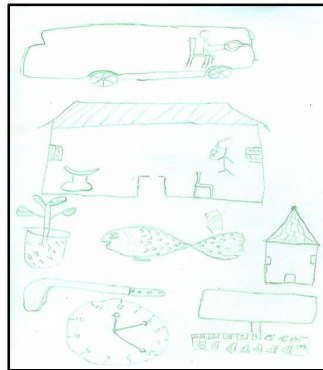


Figure 7: Draw What You Want

Source: Research participants, 2016

Figure 7 depicted the artist's desire to have a comfortable home equipped with the necessary luxuries she could think of. This artwork ignited the victim's imaginative power to reassemble and emotionally acquired all the items identified in the drawing. This development brought great some growth emotionally that also modified her behavior to cope effectively with other group members.



Figure 8: Draw What You Want

Source: Research participants, 2016

During post drawing inquiring, the client who made Figure 8 explained that the building roofed with colour brown is her dream home where she will stay with her future husband and children. According to her, the house was very beautiful and her children will be very protected and provided for by her. Unlike her parents who did not provide her with the necessities of life for which reason, she suffered unnecessarily in the hand of her "Madam".

These findings have added relevance to Rubin (2010)'s point that such productions carried out in a natural artistic environment, undeniably offer serenity to the soul of the sufferer and reconnect him/her back to life. Surely, victims were observed to break out from their dissociation tendencies caused by trauma. This confirmed the explanation of (Spiegel & Carden ~ a, 1991) that dissociation was the temporary breakdown in the thinking of victims, which has continual interrelated processes for perceiving their world, in terms of recalling the past, and have any identity that connected the past with the future. Importantly, the undirected theme "Draw What You Want" provided victims with the requisite platform to give form to their inner emotional complexities and the process of the drawing as well as the artworks served as the means to break free into their vibrant selves.

3.4. Art Therapy Session Three: Draw What Makes You Afraid

In Art Therapy, the phenomenon of the unconscious being expressed in victims' daydreams, fantasies and fears as well as pains can be transferred to images than words (Naumburg 1966). Based on this, the directed theme of "Draw What Makes You Afraid" was given to the clients. It was observed when the theme was announced that, some of the victims panicked; others yelled at one another as some were seen biting their fingers. Besides, some of the clients also became moody and quiet which may be indicative of their respective traumatic dispositions. These observations may confirm Nijenhuis, Vanderlinden, & Spinhoven's(1998) viewpoint that such expressed reactions by these human trafficked victims reflected their defensive responses in connection with their respective state of immobilization or freezing in mammals.

Nonetheless, they were observed to gain some amount of control during the drawing and eventually all those moods melted away. This theme and drawing activity reconnected the clients to suppressed traumatic experiences and memories and provided them with the artistic avenue to face their dread or fear in the safety of the drawing materials. Some of their drawings are depicted in Figures 10, 11 and 12.



Figure 9: Draw What Makes You Afraid
Source: Research participants, 2016

During post drawing enquiry, the artist of Figure 9 identified the figure on top of her drawing page as a yelling woman, her step mother who maltreated her and made her do all the chores. This artist said that her step mother denied her of a pleasant childhood and anytime she went out to play with other children, she was beaten severely, tortured and denied food. According to her the thought of her stepmother sent shivers down her spine. This feeling may confirm Moschini's explanation of drawings high on paper revealing anxiety (Moschini, 2005); her fear of her stepmother is thus shown in her placing her high on her drawing paper. She also identified the other figure at the bottom left of her drawing as herself. She became excited after talking about her work. The researcher observed that, through the drawing the victim had the occasion to express her deep feeling of fear and pain caused by her stepmother. This activity made her tackle that bondage of fear and her concurrent release. Actually, the execution of the theme "Draw What Makes You Afraid" did connect the artist to relieve her fear so as to overcome her fear.



Figure 10: Draw What Makes You Afraid
Source: Research participants, 2016

However, another client who drew Figure 10 explained that her drawing represented her home. She expressed that her parents were always fighting in the house and this attracted a whole lot of people to rush to have them separated. The artist lamented that at primary school most of her colleagues used to mock at her because of her parent's drunkenness and persistent fight. She continued that though her parents were alive, she ran from home at age 13 years with a friend who was 15 years to the city so as to find peace but unfortunately, they fell into wrong hands and were trafficked. The client explained that her drawing indicated her home which was scary to live in. The snake in the drawing she identified as the risky environment and the dangerous parents. She sighed and said "I missed my parents and wish to go to back home". Moschini's (2005) interpretation of drawings positioned at the upper left-hand corner to mean a defence mechanism of regression, and the artist longing to safety of the past to escape the present pain may well fit this client situation.

The researchers observed that though the client was scared of staying with her parents due to her unpleasant memories of them, the client still missed the nurture that is usually associated with home. The activity of "Draw What Makes You Afraid" enabled her to make a loud non-verbal statement through drawing. She came face-to-face with her dread and fear and through drawing since she expressed that fear, she possibly came to terms with that emotion. This phase of Art Therapy session brought modification in her attitude which was positive for team work.

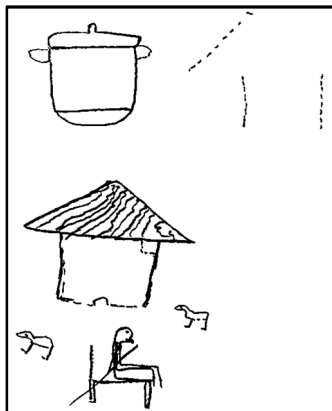


Figure 11: Draw What Makes You Afraid
Source: Research participants, 2016

Analysis of Figure 11 revealed that the client artist placed almost all the identified items on the left of her drawing paper except an uncompleted dotted house placed at the upper of the drawing space. Quantitatively, Moshini (2005) interpreted drawings positioned at the upper left-hand corner to mean a defence mechanism of regression, and the artist desire to safety of the past to avoid the present pain. Drawings high on paper also revealed anxiety, insecurity in relating to her environmental trauma identities. The Strokes of the roof were fragmented. This Moschini interpreted as anxiousness and the long strokes reflected apprehensiveness and one in need of support and assurance.

Moschini's explanation of the placement of the figure to the viewer's left was an indication that the client is very concerned with his or her past as well as the self (Moschini, 2005). The researchers noted that the artist while she expressed the meaning of the metaphors in her work; mentioned how she was maltreated and exploited as a child when she lived with her uncle. She identified herself with the pot at the top left side of her drawing as a pot she broke when fetching water and was severely punished by her uncle's wife who she placed at the lower left side of the viewer, seated on a chair with a rod used in beating her. She said that, when the topic was introduced she got scared as the whole episode of maltreatment she suffered became very real as if she was still in that unpleasant environment. She identified the animals in the drawing as the uncles two

children who did nothing in the house but to eat as she was forced to do all tedious and menial jobs in the house. After she talked and made meaning of the symbols and the metaphors in her work, she was observed to open up with excitement as compared with her reserved and withdrawn demeanour in the earlier interaction where she did not present any interest in whatever the group did.

4. Conclusions

This study has revealed the efficacy and curative powers of art to break through the emotional wall of defenses of human trafficked victims who were traumatized as a result of the ordeal they suffered. Their drawings have revealed their fears, pains and aspirations. Their drawings have also shown the therapeutic element in the art process, the healing that occurs as clients engaged in their drawings and freely associated. The study has established that drawing provides the means to entering the barricaded emotional world of traumatized victims, without any fear of being hurt again. This study has also confirmed among others that group-based art therapy, in contrast with individual treatment, can expedite healing through alliances among individuals who have experienced similar traumas (Pfeifer, 2003) like these young girls had.

Art Therapy has the positive energy to assist trauma victims face their dread which they communicate through drawing. The medium of drawing served the platform for trauma victims to ease their pain by unconsciously, pouring such inward pains onto the drawing space leading to healing. It is therefore recommended that art therapy be offered rescued human trafficked victims to assist them come off trauma, in other words, it should be included in the rehabilitation of traumatized victims since there is a curative power in the art making process.

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