
CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Using Visual Art-Based Therapy to Address Sexual Trauma: Implications for Research ICIC20 Virtual Conference – September 2020

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Introduction:

Trauma from sexual violence (SV) is a widespread social issue involving symptoms of posttraumatic stress, including issues with emotional regulation, substance abuse and health (Craner, et al., 2015). Nondominant groups living in poverty are disproportionately at risk, underscoring the need for culturally appropriate interventions to address sexual trauma (ST) (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Further, research is needed on addressing ST among adults (Schouten et al., 2015). Consequently, a systematic scoping review explored (a) art-based strategies to address adult ST and (b) implications for integrated care researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

Methods:

This scoping review was conducted using the search terms (art* OR art-based) AND (trauma OR post-traumatic stress OR PTSD OR sex* or rape OR incest OR traffick* OR violence) in Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Worldcat databases. Scholarly articles were included if they (a) explored visual art-based therapy to address ST among adults, (b) were research-based, and (c) written in English.

Results:

The search yielded 118 articles. Seventeen were screened in for review. Results suggest visual art-based approaches can effectively address ST, especially when combined with existing therapy approaches (Hearns, 2009). Such strategies can help with identifying, processing and recovering from abuse (Hearns, 2009), promoting self-esteem (Howard, 1990) and healing from eating disorders linked to ST (Hodge & Simpson, 2016) as well as community building (Neuschul & Page, 2018).

Discussion:

This is especially relevant for integrative work with nondominant groups, as survivors are systematically abused in dominant society and in religious and economic systems, resulting in complex trauma requiring multi-level interventions. Moreover, ST is frequently too horrific to verbalize, limiting both sharing of traumatic experiences and treatment. Thus visual art-based strategies are recommended with victims and at-risk populations. as is further funding for related research and training.

Conclusions:

Results demonstrate numerous benefits of visual art-based approaches, such as facilitating identification of SV, decreased stress, validation, processing and recovery through increasing self-esteem and community empowerment. Still, more research is needed with diverse populations to advance culturally appropriate art-based interventions along with further funding in this area.

Lessons Learned:

It was assumed more than seventeen scholarly articles would meet the broad review criteria, especially as there were no limitations on time or geographic location. Yet excluded articles seldom involved research and SV was rarely addressed, thus more ST research is particularly needed.

Limitations:

The sample (n=17 of 118 screened articles) is relatively small due to limited extant research. While this highlights a need for further study, generalizability is limited. Still, findings from existing articles are synthesized for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to offer an understanding of innovative, empowerment-building strategies relevant to multiple disciplines and settings.

Suggestions for Future Research, Policy and Practice:

Art-based ST research should involve larger and more diverse samples using rigorous instruments, evaluation (Murray et al., 2017) and culturally appropriate techniques. Moreover, a critical feminist social justice approach is recommended to prioritize voices of historically oppressed survivors (Wright & Wright, 2017) and mental health policies should promote justice-oriented art-based cultural training (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009).