

Vulnerabilities in personality as a risk factor for victimization

A. Challenges in establishing evidence-based treatment – Rina Ghafoerkhan

B. Tailoring treatment – Linda Verhaak

Both at Equator Foundation, Netherlands

(two connected presentations)

A. Challenges in establishing evidence-based treatment – Rina Ghafoerkhan

Background: Limited research has been conducted into the histories and mental health of victims of sexual exploitation. Scientific findings show high prevalence rates of experienced neglect and abuse during childhood and of PTSD and depression in this population. Given the high prevalence of childhood adverse experiences and based on broad clinical experience with victims of sexual exploitation, personality-linked problems (i.e., self-concept, affect-regulation, interpersonal relations, etc.) may also be expected. For scientific underpinning we currently conduct a study examining the psychological profiles and histories of adult female victims of sexual exploitation. Next to this we are in the process of designing a treatment effectiveness study on psychotherapies (e.g. trauma-focused therapy and schema therapy) as provided in our treatment setting. In this presentation we will share challenges in designing a treatment effectiveness study for victims of sexual exploitation set against their unstable social and legal status.

Aims: This presentation aims to share a scientific exploration and hypotheses and their backgrounds rather than to present study findings and outcomes.

Methods: The presentation will cover scientific findings around pre-trafficking abuse and common mental health problems in this group. Additionally we will address challenges in designing a treatment effectiveness study among this population.

Results: The audience will have increased knowledge of commonly reported psychological complaints in victims of sexual exploitation, the broader context in which we offer psychotherapy to victims of sexual exploitation, and our upcoming research plans.

Discussion: Based on individual histories of victims of sexual exploitation, personality-linked problems can be expected to constitute major problems, potentially acting as risk factors for re-victimization. However, no studies to date have looked into personality factors in this population. Neither is it known if treatment can reduce the risk of re-victimization.

Conclusions: In knowledge of the mental health needs of victims of sexual exploitation there is a need for evidence about personality-linked vulnerabilities and, in accordance, evidence-based interventions.

B. Tailoring treatment – Linda Verhaak

Background: Clinical practice indicates that victims of sexual exploitation often feature personality-linked problems as a comorbid diagnosis additional to PTSS symptomatology. Therefore, a treatment approach addressing recent and past traumas as well as self-concept, affect-regulation and interpersonal relations seems to be appropriate. In clinical practice working with victims of sexual abuse and/ or human trafficking the treatment package traditionally consists of stabilisation focused methods such as psycho-education, psychomotor

therapy and trauma focused therapy. Schema therapy is hypothesised to be an essential element to prevent victimisation for those victims with personality problems.

Aims: We aim to convey the rationale of therapeutic work with victims with personality-linked vulnerabilities, and to inform the audience about our treatment method.

Methods: This presentation will cover clinically observed psychotrauma and personality problems in this group, and the eligibility of a treatment approach concurrently focusing on both problem domains. The treatment will be exemplified by a case study.

Results: The audience will have increased awareness that practice as usual may fail in addressing personality features possibly acting as risk factors for re-victimization. It will have an understanding that a double-focused treatment approach may help to decrease such vulnerabilities.

Discussion: There is no evidence that personality factors constitute a major problem in victims of sexual exploitation, and it is not known if treatment can reduce the risk of re-victimization.

Conclusions: Treatment options for victims of sexual exploitation are under-reported in the scientific literature, and need to be critically addressed. Next to trauma-focused therapy methods, personality-focused methods may be relevant.