

Survivors and Allies Working Together to Bridge the Commercial Sex and Sex Trafficking Research Gaps

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Stacysjoy... A Woman Moving Forward [1]

Trauma, fear of judgment, shame, and blame for far too long have silenced survivors of human trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, and prostitution over the age of eighteen from sharing their stories. Often, survivors encounter laws that are put into place to help clarify the victimization of people under 18, while survivors over 18 are treated as hardened criminals. Today, I want to talk to readers about one of my experiences of breaking my silence in academia as a survivor of human trafficking, and how I did it through my participation on a team doing human trafficking research.

As a survivor leader professional, I have experienced lots of disrespect and discrimination in academic and professional settings. Due to these experiences, I wanted to understand why survivors experience maltreatment and stigma and how research can help understand this group. This desire led me to choose to join a research team, the Human Trafficking Community Research Hub (HTCRH) at William James College for my leadership psychology PsyD practicum. The HTCRH team was bridging the gap between survivors and non-survivors as their research projects have always included the input of survivors. I was curious to observe how people who weren't survivors researching trafficked victims understood them. Would the research team see survivors as "bad people," or could they view them as "people" who deserve a deeper understanding.

I interviewed with the HTCRH director, Paola M. Contreras, PsyD, and she invited me to become "The Hub's" lead research assistant, given my extensive knowledge about human trafficking and years of experience providing direct services to this population. My goals were to 1) work with the coding team as a content expert, 2) learn to code using the consensual qualitative (Hill, 2011) approach, and 3) evaluate any experience about the HTCRH that I became curious about and write about my findings.

[1] StacysJoy...A Woman Moving Forward is Stacy Reed's project to work against the sexual exploitation of women.

The Study

The HTCRH is completing a unique mixed method study that asked 50 participants diverse by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation to complete Adult Attachment Interviews (AAI), multiple objective measures about people's well-being and mental health struggles, and a qualitative interview about their life experiences in commercial sex. The study has been conducted under the leadership of Paola M. Contreras, PsyD, Associate Professor at William James College and Heather Wightman, MSW, MPH, Executive Director of RIA, Inc. The main research question is to understand what factors complicate or facilitate a person's exit from commercial sex when they want to get out. I thought the inclusion criteria for the study was interesting. The researchers used a large swath approach, and almost anyone with life experience in commercial sex was invited to participate. The rationale was that people define themselves in complex ways and that even when their experiences are marked by abuse and exploitation, they may talk about it in ways that the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) definition of trafficking cannot capture. Interestingly, well over two-thirds of the study participants reported experiences in commercial sex that met TVPA criteria for trafficking. However, seldom did anyone in the study use the word "trafficking" to talk about their experiences in commercial sex.

The Research Team

For the last year and a half, the coding team has been developing domains, core ideas, and themes using consensual qualitative research principles (Hill, 2011) to understand the survivors' stories. The coding team meets for 3-4 hours every week, and everyone carries out independent work related to the study outside of meeting times. The HTCRH coding team is a mix of 12 people who represent a diversity of races, ethnicities, genders, nationalities, and spiritual and sexual orientations:

- Two MA level counselors
- A mix of four WJC Clinical Psychology PsyD, Leadership Psychology PsyD, and Clinical Mental Health Counseling MA students
- Two WJC faculty members
- One member has a background in finance and leadership psychology
- Another member is a criminal defense attorney
- Two members work at an anti-trafficking organization as development and executive director
- Two of us in addition to belonging to one of the aforementioned groups, also have lived experiences of human trafficking.

I was initially cautious onboarding into the HTCRH. On many platforms, non-survivors can appear distant, withdrawn, blaming, shaming, too sympathetic, and act uncomfortable toward survivors. Other times non-survivors express shock, disgust, or interest in the survivors' lived experiences only for research purposes. I and other survivors working on teams often notice that non-survivors can separate themselves, often in unconscious ways, from people who have been exploited, trafficked, and especially prostituted. They think of us as being far removed from their lives and experiences. As I thought about these observations, I decided I wanted to understand more about the discomfort of non-survivors around survivors, a question typically asked about survivors. My hope was to help change how we—survivors and non-survivors working together to counter human trafficking—treat one another.

When the HTCRH director onboarded the other person with lived experience and me to the team there was no pressure to present ourselves as survivors. But I quickly felt comfortable bringing my lived experiences to the meetings after noticing that my interventions were well received, and that people engaged in a real way. That is, I didn't feel that people were being too friendly, or too accommodating, nor distant and dismissive. I was used to having one or the other extreme of response, and something felt different about this space.

When the HTCRH coding team reviewed qualitative interviews, sometimes I knew that the non-survivors did not understand the language of the study participant and used those opportunities to share my knowledge with the team. A recent example that comes to mind is a participant's description of being in commercial sex and finding herself lured into a locality where she was trapped for multiple days using drugs and forced to have sex she did not want. I related to the team how common the "trap house" experience was for women in commercial sex struggling with addiction. I told them how the women are lured in by the promise of drugs, which they want because of their addiction, and then they are forced to have sex in exchange for the drugs. There were times when survivors misunderstood non-survivors' understanding of the material. In those instances, the team was respectful, open to explanations, and they engaged in thoughtful conversations. The HTCRH director, who leads the coding meetings, never rushes these moments, and takes all the time required to clarify perspectives and work together to find a way forward. In other words, we work hard to find consensus.

My Survivor-Led Project

To bridge the gaps between survivors and non-survivors, I developed a project where I requested to interview all the members of the HTCRH team for a brief program

evaluation. The goal was to ask non-survivors questions to understand why they were interested in researching people who have been trafficked or prostituted and how they felt about the stories they were coding in the HPCR. I wanted to know how they hoped the study's findings could help the population and those researching the phenomenon in the future. A total of five of the twelve team members agreed to participate in the interview and became my key informants. I explained that I would write a paper about my findings after I interviewed people on the coding team and that they would be able to revise and edit anything they did not want me to publish. Interviews lasted on average 40 minutes, and I recorded them and then transcribed to identify common themes across the five interviewees. To maintain my participants' anonymity, I use pseudonyms to identify them and have omitted details that could be too revealing.

The main themes that team members shared included:

1. Gratitude that survivors and non-survivors could work together.
2. Learning new things about human trafficking from the team coding experience.
3. Awareness that staying open is a way to identify unconscious biases.
4. Survivor contributions are crucial in human trafficking research.

Mary's interview, the other person with lived experience of trafficking on the team, **shared that she was grateful that people in the world cared about survivors enough to understand the trauma they experienced.** She explained that her interest in working with the HPCR came from personal experiences and her pursuit of a career in psychology. She was interested in bridging the gap between survivors and providers due to the many misunderstandings that non-survivors have about survivors. Mary noted the importance of language, identification, and moving away from the stigma that comes when people identify as prostitutes. Before working with the HPCR, Mary shared that she was not aware that prostitutes are victims of human trafficking, that language does matter, and that she was happy to have another survivor on the coding team. She said, "First of all, talking about sex and all that stuff, some people don't even like to say the words, and I'm very comfortable with it. So, it's good to have another survivor." Mary said that she agreed with the domains the team created and that she had extreme satisfaction being part of a "phenomenal team" where she could both teach and learn about the phenomena of human trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, and prostitution. She concluded that it was important for people to understand that "we are all the same but different and need to help one another."

Ana, one of the mental health counselors on the team, shared that her interest in learning more about human trafficking started with a school project that had a lasting impact on her. She shared that when it comes to people identifying with having experienced commercial sex, trafficking, and prostitution, each survivor has a different life experience. **Ana said it was interesting to learn and understand the language of survivors "without giving into the stigma."** She noted how her interactions with the HTCRH team helped build trust between survivors and non-survivors to do meaningful work.

I am not trying to offend Michael, but my experience interviewing him was slightly different at the beginning. Using the consensual qualitative approach, I have learned that stating my biases is crucial. Michael fits the description of the "typical buyer" – that is, the White men I had encountered in my experiences of trafficking as a Black woman. However, my fears quickly dissipated when I experienced Michael's respectful and kind attitude. When I interviewed Michael, we could talk openly about my initial reservations towards him. He was, as always, open and receptive to what I shared. Michael shared that his interest in working with the HTCRH was because he had a prior partner who was trafficked and that joining the team was important for his own development and healing process, and that it also provided a venue to explore and pursue his desire to work in the service of others' healing. **Bridging the gaps between survivors and non-survivors includes being able to tap into or connect and heal through painful experiences. Seeing one another as an equal and not as "us" vs. "them" helps us move along in the process.**

I also interviewed Carrie, who I work with at RIA Inc. as part of their leadership team. **Carrie shared that her interest in the HTCRH was as a learning experience,** and as an ally. She admitted that she did not know all the "intricacies of what a survivor goes through" and thought this was an excellent way for her to learn. **She was transparent in sharing that she had not linked any form of human trafficking to prostitution and that learning this stimulated her interest to continue meeting with the team.** She noted that if she had biases, she was not aware of it and reflected on this point and the importance of being on a team that could help her see her blind spots. **Carrie's response helped me understand that non-survivors are not out to "consciously" judge or stigmatize and that we all have biases, so we should always lead anti-trafficking work with an open mind to change.**

I also work with Alicia on RIA, Inc's leadership team. **She noticed how allies outnumber survivors in research and the importance of input from survivors.** As a survivor who has talked to many other survivors and survivor leader professionals, we agreed that survivors need to have a seat at the tables where "our kind" are observed

or researched. Survivors appreciate reading and learning information from research where they are taken seriously. I asked Alicia to share her thoughts about conscious and unconscious bias. She expressed her dismay about people being purchased, and she sees all forms of purchase in commercial sex as violence. I agree with Alicia's perspective but understand that others might not, such as groups that are advocating for the rights of people who identify as sex workers.

Alicia's thoughts reminded me of a study of prostitution in nine countries with 854 respondents that found 64% had been threatened with a weapon, 73% had been physically assaulted, and 57% had been raped. Of that, 57% (483 people) had been raped in prostitution, and 59% (286 people) had been raped in prostitution more than six times (Farley et al., 2008). These staggering facts that highlight the undeniable overlaps between prostitution and human trafficking are important ideas to think about when doing human trafficking research. Helping people not close to these experiences understand the trauma survivors go through is crucial to foster empathy and promote respect towards a group that is otherwise stigmatized and forgotten.

Concluding Thoughts

In this program evaluation, there were other HTCRH members that were not interviewed but shared ideas that were kind and welcoming to survivors in the work on "the Hub". I remember comments such as, "Thank you for clarity with the language," "Oh, that's what they mean when they say this or that," and "Oh, so those are red flags?" I felt myself relax on the team and become increasingly more open, even when I disagreed with things that people said. I started to see these moments as invitations to converse and deepen our understanding. I benefitted from the teachings of Schein's Humble Consulting stance that I learned in classes at WJC. This perspective emphasizes that consultants need to leave behind the old idea of consultants being distant with their clients. Problems in organizations are messy, Schein notes, and to deal with them effectively the consultant needs to be on board with being authentically open in the process, and to do it with a humble attitude. All these leader qualities are essential, I've learned, to bridge the gaps between survivors and non-survivors to work collectively on research teams.

In closing, this experience has been the beginning of a new way for me to encounter research. For non-survivor researchers, I encourage you to set aside any fears you may have and to allow survivor input on research teams. When we let all contribute, we can move away from stigma as our opportunity to learn grows as I learned in the interviews with the research team. Often, if something feels like it needs something else, it likely does. A research project about human trafficking with no survivor input is

a missed opportunity to deepen knowledge about this crime. The good news is that you can start doing something about it right away. Reach out, invite us to participate on your teams and then listen to us, and let us contribute and I promise that we will also listen and learn with you --that's the straightforward formula for survivors and non-survivors to work together and grow together.

References

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