

From Victim to Survivor: Understanding the Reflexive Positioning of Adults Who Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse on Their Journey to Recovery

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the reflexive positioning and the corresponding social force of three adults with childhood sexual abuse (CSA) experience. Although the journey towards recovery is highly individualized, participants' narratives indicate six reflexive positions spread across three timeframes: 1) Self During and after CSA and revictimization: a) At Fault and b) Damaged ; 2) Self During help-seeking: c) Agentic and d) Having Worth ; and 3) Self During Recovery up to the Present: e) Work in Progress and f) Advocate. The three participants showed common storylines yet display nuances in their reflexive positioning. Results from this study underscore the dynamic process of positioning of self towards recovery from childhood sexual abuse. Reflexive positioning offers another perspective in understanding this process. Moreover, being positioned in certain ways by caring-others has important implications in the shift from victim to survivor for adults with CSA experience.

Keywords: childhood sexual abuse (CSA), positioning theory, reflexive positioning

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Introduction

There is increasing recognition to differentiate between a victim and a survivor. To date, these words have been loosely used in childhood sexual abuse (CSA) literature. Studies up to the 1970s used the term *victim*. However, it was replaced by the term *survivor* beginning the 1980s (see Alcott & Gray, 1993; Bhuvaneshwar & Shafer, 2004; Naples, 2003; Reavey & Gough, 2000). The term victim provided the needed impetus for their voices to be heard, it has unwittingly stigmatized them and placed them in the danger of revictimization as most of them are female, powerless, and passive (Reavey & Gough, 2000), and rendering them more marginalized. Recent studies have noted behavioral differences between the two. It is argued that “while victims have given up and are helpless, survivors are fighting back and are empowered” (Dillenburger, Fargas, & Akhonzada, 2005, p. 224). The term survivor is increasingly used to refer to individuals who are making choices (Dunn, 2005) and are making a conscious effort of redefining themselves and their abuse experience. But how does the change from victim to survivor happen? This study intends to focus on this yet unknown shift.

CSA Narratives: Medical and Clinical Fields

The medical field looks at individuals with CSA experience from the vantage point of its prevalence in the population and clinical subgroups. They identify long-term effects, risk factors, prevention, and factors that mediate or moderate between abuse characteristics and adult functioning (Draucker, 2001). This emphasis has positioned these individuals as sick persons suffering from a host of physical complaints (Anda et al., 2006; Irish, Kobayashi, & Delahanty, 2010; Leeb, Lewis, & Zolotor, 2011), thereby needing medical treatment. The clinical field, on the other hand, looks at CSA in terms of the psychiatric effects and psychological disorders they suffer many years after the abuse (Glaister & Abel, 2001; Leeb et al., 2011; McGregor, Julich, Glover, & Gautam, 2010; Giles, 2006). This focus has, in turn, positioned them as psychiatric patients that need intervention.

These ways of viewing these individuals leave many facets of their journey unnoticed. For one, they are positioned as patients while medical and clinical professionals as experts. Aside from that, the narratives they tell professionals are mostly fragments, and not complete stories, of their experience.

CSA Narratives: The Social Sciences

Social constructionists offer alternative perspectives in understanding how individuals live their experience. Discursive analysis belongs in this framework. The discursive approach begins with a view that people are social and relational beings and narratives are produced out of these social interactions. One of the forms of human discourse is narrative. Through the analysis of the stories they tell, a deeper understanding of their experience is possible as they reveal how meanings they have attached to their experience are produced socially.

The study of language use or discourses of individuals with CSA has been done since the early 1980s and proved robust. Feminist research and writings about victims of CSA have given rise to the disclosures of their experience thus creating the victim

discourse. It was replaced by the powerful survivor discourse in the late 1980s focusing more on the strength, courage, and resilience of women and children who had overcome childhood adversity and emerged stronger as a result (Hunter, 2009, 2010).

As society's awareness widened, more stories of CSA came out. Through these narratives, therapists were afforded a richer glimpse into their lives and experiences and, therefore, provide more effective therapy (Anderson & Hiersteiner, 2008; Banyard & Williams, 2006; Phanichrat & Townsend, 2010). Current literature suggests that healing is possible but each's experience is subjective and unique (San Diego, 2011) and, therefore, cannot be measured by objective criteria (Bhuvanewar & Shafer, 2004; Brown, Kallivayalil, Mendelsohn, & Harvey, 2012).

These studies also show that CSA may cause the development of an impaired self and complex adaptation to developmental challenges. These, in turn, affect how individuals regard him-/herself and thereby affecting one's talk. The lens of positioning theory (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003), in particular, reflexive positioning (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995), provides an alternative approach to understanding how adults with CSA position themselves in their talk across time.

Positioning as a theoretical framework

Within a social constructionist paradigm, positioning theory is a conceptual and methodological tool in studying how identity is discursively produced within conversation and communication, both present and historically (Davies & Harre, 1990). It theorizes that the constant flow of everyday life is fragmented into distinct episodes (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). In these episodes, the individuals position the self and others simultaneously at any given moment within a particular context. As different and specific situations and conditions are experienced, the individual defines and redefines the self so that there emerges a "self-concept of a given moment" (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995) which makes it a dynamic and fluid process.

In recent years, positioning theory is increasingly used in analyzing self-positioning in written and oral autobiographies to explore and understand how the individual positions the self in various contexts (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999; van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). This study focuses on the self-positioning of individuals with CSA experience at any given moment in their journey to recovery.

Reflexive Positioning. Self-positioning in internal talk is termed as reflexive positioning. It is a process by which individuals, either intentionally or unintentionally, position one's self in unfolding personal stories told to oneself (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). This internal discourse can both be formal, such as writing a diary intended to be read and reviewed by the writer alone, and informal, such as when a person tells himself, "You can do it!" (Harre, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009).

To understand the life story of adults with CSA experience, reflexive positioning offers a useful and relevant framework for conceptualizing shifts as participants go through a simultaneous, dynamic, and continuing process of self-positioning in their talk to themselves. In this process, there is *I* (or the self as the subject) observing and

positioning *me* (or the self as the object) at any given moment. This is possible because reflexivity as the basic character of the self affords one to view the self subjectively and objectively simultaneously in any given context.

Positioning Triad. Positioning theory looks at the tri-polar structure of talk, consisting of (i) storylines; (ii) positions; and (iii) social force (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Storylines can be thought of as narratives to make words and actions meaningful to themselves and others (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). Positions, linked with and are often similar to storylines, are metaphorical concepts of their “part” or “role” in the unfolding the dynamic episodes (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Consequently, positions and storylines are given meaning by the individual and by others as the social force or acts (van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). A social force, therefore, is how the self and others respond to the storylines and positions. Accordingly, this study looks at the narratives of each participant – at what is said (storyline), make inferences about the reflexive positions that are being assumed by the participants (position), and how the self and others respond (social force).

Statement of the Problem

This study uses the discursive lens of positioning theory as its theoretical contribution to the understanding of the life journey of individuals with CSA experience. The question the study wants to answer is: How do adults with CSA experience position the self across time on their journey to recovery?

Method

This qualitative study utilized semistructured interviews with three adults with CSA experience. They were asked to narrate, in retrospect, their CSA experience and how they talked about themselves when they talk to themselves across time. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) referred to this as ‘accountive positioning’, an interview involving talk about talk. Transcriptions of the interviews were the text used for the analysis.

Participants

Three adult women were purposively chosen for this study because of their past association with the first author. Given the stigma that is attached to being sexually abused, the first author’s intimate knowledge of their CSA experience and their journey was an important consideration for their inclusion and facilitated the in-depth analysis of data which is one of the strengths of this study. A general background of the participants, names changed to maintain confidentiality, follows.

Ann, 29 years old, is single. She shared episodes of abuses starting age seven by an older sibling, sexual harassment at fifteen by a friend, almost sold by her brother to an older man for sexual favors at seventeen, and raped at 18. She left home and stayed with a couple at nineteen years old with whom she was also emotionally and physically abused. At twenty-one she found herself living in the streets where she became involved with and again abused by an older man. At 23 she came in contact with a Christian organization where she received mentoring. She started counseling at twenty-four years old.

Bret, aged 36, married and holds a full-time job. Her CSA started at age six by an older cousin who lived with the family and lasted for two years. She read by accident a woman's CSA experience in a column of a weekly women's magazine that her mother subscribed to. She learned from the columnist's response that her experience had a name: sexual abuse. She then started to devise ways to avoid being alone with her cousin. At 32, she sought counseling where she disclosed.

Venus, aged 35, married and works full time. She shared episodes of CSA at the age of about five by an uncle who lived with her family, lasting for about three years. At junior high, she had fainting spells. Diagnosed as epileptic, a doctor prescribed medicines that did not help. She was raped and gang-raped in college. She never told anybody. Several times she committed suicide but woke up alive each time. During her sophomore, one of her professors counseled her. Several years later, she sought therapy for safety and trust issues.

Instrument Schedule

The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions. Participants were first asked to draw a timeline of their life from as early as they can remember up to the present. The initial set of questions elicited a narration of history and background of the episodes written in their timeline. The main set of questions elicited an account of the participants' talk to themselves about themselves as the abuses occurred. A sample form of questioning is as follow: When this abuse was happening, recall what you told to yourself about yourself. Try to remember exactly what you were saying to yourself during and after the abuse.

Procedure

Initial contact was done by online messages explaining the purpose of the study. When they consented to participate, arrangements were made to meet. After a pilot interview and trial analysis, the first author conducted the individual interviews in Bahasa Indonesia. Data were then transcribed and translated to English by the first author to maintain confidentiality.

The raw data filled 32 pages making up the data set. Each transcript was manually coded. After initial and subsequent coding, the analysis involved: (i) determining the storylines presented in their talk in each episode; (ii) surfacing the reflexive positions taken up; and (iii) understanding the meanings of utterances and the accompanying social force, following the methodological framework of positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harre, 1999; Harre & Moghaddam, 2003). Subsequent analysis involved two blind coders to obtain consensual validation that the derived storylines and positions were 'true to the text.'

Results

The final analysis of the data set extracted three timeframes: (a) the self during and after the abuse and revictimization; (b) the self during help-seeking and disclosure; and (c) the self on the road to recovery. These timeframes, graphically presented

below, are not necessarily linear because of the recurring overlap of reflexive positioning across time.

	During and After CSA and Revictimization		During Help-seeking and Disclosure		During Recovery, and Present	
Storyline/ Reflexive Positioning	Self as stupid or at fault	Self as damaged	Self as agentic	Self as having worth	Self as a work in progress	Self as advocate
Social Force	To not seek help from others and to take more abuses from others	To treat self as nothing and to take more abuses from others	To not take abuses anymore and to seek help	Disclosure and develop supportive relationships	I am getting stronger and better; Able to take care of myself	I am now free, so I can help others

Table 1. Patterns of Reflexive Positioning Across Time

In each timeframe, two sets of storylines, positioning, and social force are identified. The beginning reflexive positioning of the participants (self as stupid or at fault and self as damaged) reflects the self-blame pattern, a common positioning of individuals with CSA experience. The social force of this positioning is that others can take advantage of them and can repeatedly abuse them. In the middle timeframe, they showed a pattern of agentic reflexive positioning (self as agentic and have worth). The shift here led to disclosure and establishing supportive relationships. The last timeframe shows a pattern of positioning that goes beyond this agency that now reflexively position themselves as stronger and better individuals (self as a work in progress and self as an advocate). These carry the social force of others seeing them as able to care for themselves and others. A detailed discussion of each timeframe follows below.

The Self During and After CSA and Revictimization

This timeframe contains a series of episodes showing certain patterns in their utterance and reflexive positioning of victimhood, covering years of abuse and revictimization. The table below reflects the pattern across the three participants.

Participant	Storyline/Reflexive Positioning	Social Force
	<i>Self as stupid or at fault</i>	<i>To not seek help from others and to take more abuses from others</i>
Ann	Naïve Gullible	Others can take advantage of her. Others can repeatedly abuse her.
Bret	Naïve & confused Not smart enough	Others can take advantage of her Others can continue to abuse her
Venus	Innocent Ignorant	Others can take advantage of her Others can repeatedly abuse her
	<i>Self as damaged</i>	<i>To treat self as nothing and to take more abuses from others</i>
Ann	Worthless Useless	Others can abuse her all the time. Others can use her the way they want.
Bret	Dirty Shameful	Others can treat her as garbage. Others can see her as blemished.
Venus	Hopeless Worthless	Others can abuse her anytime. Others can see her as having no future.

Table 2. Positioning During and After CSA and Revictimization

Positioning of self as at fault. A common pattern of reflexive positioning among the three participants in these episodes is the self as being at fault for being abused. Their common storyline/reflexive positioning is “stupid” when they talked to themselves about themselves but meant different things to each of them. The social force of this reflexive positioning is, consequently, not to seek help.

For Ann, stupid means naïve, or young. But when she was revictimized several times up to her late teens, stupid came to mean gullible. She continued to blame herself for being easily taken in when adults showed attention. Her utterance, “*Oh, the word I always say is ‘stupid!’ That’s what always comes out automatically.*” (lines 79-80), indicating that she blames herself for all her experiences of abuse. The social force of this reflexive positioning is that others took advantage of her and others repeatedly abused her. For Bret, stupid means naïve and confused. She even wondered if this was love. But when she knew at eight years old that her experience is called sexual abuse, she started to think of ways to avoid her abuser. However, when she was abused again and again despite devising ways to stop it, she began to scold herself, “*...you cannot do anything well. See you are so stupid! How come you cannot avoid being abused again!*” (lines 131-132). Stupid has come to mean not smart enough. The social force of this reflexive positioning is that others took advantage of her and continued to abuse her. For Venus, stupid means she was innocent and ignorant. “*At that time I did not understand at all but now I know it’s called sexual abuse*” (lines 101-102)... “*I felt like a was a stupid person...*” (line 154). The social force of this positioning is that others took advantage of her and repeatedly abused her. However,

after episodes of revictimizations, she shut down and did not make any conscious effort on reflecting about what happened to her. She acted as if everything was fine and normal, and remained innocent and ignorant despite being abused several times by different perpetrators.

Positioning of self as damaged. Another pattern that the participants shared in this timeframe is the positioning of self as damaged. For Ann, this meant she is worthless and useless as reflected when she said, “[I am]...not good, worthless, meaningless, nothing... nothing good comes from me! I am already damaged, ruined, a mess, broken, there’s nothing more” (lines 80-82). This carries the social force that others can abuse her anytime and use her however they want since she is already damaged. For Bret, being damaged means she is dirty and shameful which is shown in her utterance, “...I started to feel dirty, felt I was different from the others, started to feel ashamed because I know that my friends have not experienced what I have” (lines 132-134). This takes on the social force that others can treat her as garbage and see her as blemished. Venus’ positioning of self as damaged means worthless and hopeless as indicated when she said, “...I wanted to kill myself because I felt I was always a victim... I felt worthless. Then when these things happened to me, I kept asking where God was? If there is a god, why didn’t he help me?” (lines 430-432). The social force of this positioning of self is that others can abuse her anytime and that they see her as having no future.

The pattern of self-positioning as damaged as seen across their stories implies a declaration of worthlessness, brokenness, and utter ruin. This carries the social force of them treating themselves as nothing and taking all the abuses from others. In effect, because they are nothing and have nothing to lose anymore, they unwittingly allow themselves to be repeatedly abused.

The Self During Help-Seeking

This time frame contains a series of episodes that depict acts of survival that eventually led to disclosure. The table below reflects the pattern of seeking help across the three participants.

Participant	Storyline/Reflexive Positioning	Social Force
	<i>Self as agentic</i>	<i>To not seek help from others and to take more abuses from others</i>
Ann	Able to refuse abuse and run away Able to seek help	Others saw her as capable of protecting herself and bounce back Others stopped abusing her
Bret	Able to seek knowledge Able to evade her abuser	Others saw her as smart Others saw her as capable
Venus	Able to imagine herself as protected Able to escape to her own world	Others saw her as a dreamer Others saw her as not grounded

Table 3. Positioning During Help-seeking

Positioning of self as agentic. This positioning ushers episodes of help-seeking covering several years, overlapping with the previous period. When the participants first showed some form of agency, the abuses were still going on. For example, Ann, who was abused by several perpetrators, showed some form of agency when she kept running away from them. She said, *“I ran away several times from my abusers because I did not want to be treated that way. I did not like the pain and suffering”* (lines 588-589). Running away brought respite for a time, although she was revictimized several times. Her reflexive positioning in this utterance is that of someone able to escape abuse. Then when she finally sought therapy, she showed more agency. She positioned herself as someone able to seek help. The social force is that others saw her as capable of protecting herself and bounce back so that others stopped abusing her. Bret, on the other hand, proved to be a very agentic 8-year-old while still being repeatedly abused. Accidentally reading a help-column in a local women’s weekly magazine that her mother subscribed to opened her eyes. She learned to devise ways to stop her abuses by telling herself, *“... ‘when he makes his moves you have to go inside a room that you can lock from inside’. I started to find ways to avoid him. When my parents leave the house, I ask to go with them. Then when he is asleep, I play outside. I started to think of ways like that”* (lines 122, 124-126). She further told herself, *“...you have to avoid him, you cannot be near him, you cannot be in the same room with him alone”* (lines 190-191). Knowledge became her strongest ally and became agentic without the help of others at a very young age. The social force of this positioning is that the perpetrator saw her as smart and capable, so he stopped abusing her. On another plane, Venus’ agency comes from a unique form—a fantasy world where she felt safe and protected. This behavior is usually seen as problematic in trauma literature in that the individual avoids and escapes reality. But in this study, this is taken as a form of agency as this is what made her survive the years of CSA and revictimization. She said, *“If you ask what made me bear it...I used to fantasize a lot, weaving a fantasy that is beautiful..., Then I would fantasize that I would have a nice family, protected... I would create a fantasy world”* (lines 159-161). She further said, *“I am a person who is full of imagination. My imaginations are just that, I would meet a good prince, who will protect me. Like in a fantasy world.”* (lines 170-171). After each revictimization, her fantasy world kept her sane. The social force of this reflexive positioning was that others see her as a daydreamer and not well grounded. Others may also see her as having a world of her own and not herself many times. Thus, revictimization may have easily happened.

This pattern of self-positioning across participants reflects forms of agency that carries the social force of not taking the abuses anymore, both consciously and unconsciously. For Ann and Bret, this was the start of a series of episodes that led to disclosure while Venus channeled hers into a world she created. While Ann and Bret made tangible efforts to stop the abuses by physically detaching themselves from their abuser, Venus detached emotionally and psychologically. This may be a key to understanding individuals who seemed not to have done anything to stop or remove themselves from abusive situations like Venus.

During Recovery and Present

This timeframe indicates patterns of positioning as being on the road to recovery and how they see themselves in the present. This table reflects the pattern across the three participants.

Participant	Storyline/Reflexive Positioning	Social Force
	<i>Self as a work in progress</i>	<i>I am getting stronger and better Able to take care of myself</i>
Ann	Much better Mendable as a puzzle	Others see her as resilient.
Bret	Dealing with issues; Surfacing as a train from a tunnel	Others see her as strong and dynamic
Venus	A better person; Metamorphosing as a rainbow after heavy rains	Others see her as a better person
	<i>Self as advocate</i>	<i>I am now free, so I can take care of others</i>
Ann	Nourisher	Others see her as an advocate for the emotionally needy
Bret	Protector; Defender	Others see her as an advocate for children
Venus	Counselor	Others see her as an advocate for other women

Table 4. Positioning During Recovery, Present, and Future

Positioning of self as a work in progress. This pattern of self-positioning indicates another shift. Ann now positions her self as not yet healed but much better when she said, *“I feel I am much better but not totally healed yet, but much, much better. I have started to accept myself, learned to be more tolerant when I do something wrong. Then I am now more aware that I have problems, to face my problems. Before, I did not want to face my problems”* (lines 212-218). She chose a puzzle to illustrate what she is going through in this period. *“I can see myself...like pieces of a puzzle that have not been put together, scattered, separated everywhere. That was how I saw myself... now I can put together the puzzle pieces slowly”* (lines 163-166). In saying this, she also positions herself as mendable and in the future a completed puzzle. The social force of this reflexive positioning is that others see her as resilient.

In the same vein, Bret reflexively positions herself as a work in progress like a train inside a dark and long tunnel while the abuses were still on-going and it is taking a long time for her to come out. *“... I used to imagine, well I like riding a train... a train would pass under a tunnel then after a while there’s light again. I used to imagine*

being in a tunnel...” (lines 160-161). This metaphor indicates her reflexive positioning while experiencing CSA but also as a future self-positioning of coming out of a dark tunnel into the light. Therefore, the reflexive positioning here is that of seeing herself as moving towards healing. The social force of this positioning is of others seeing her as strong and dynamic, as she moves on a journey from darkness to light.

Similarly, Venus positions herself on the road to recovery as becoming a better person. She also reflexively positions as having metamorphosed. *“I like rainbows...After heavy rains suddenly a splash of beautiful colors appears. Before there were storms in life... problems, but I can see them more objectively now... I used to blame myself... But now I can see clearly, I try to see better”* (lines 661-669). She likens her abuse experiences to heavy rains but her life now as having metamorphosed into a rainbow of beautiful colors. The social force of this positioning is that of others are seeing her as changing for the better.

This pattern of reflexive positioning (self as a work in progress) are episodes where the participants see themselves as having started on the road to recovery, getting stronger and better. Although not yet healed, the participants see themselves as able to take care of their self. The social force is that others can see them as able to take care of themselves already and they can protect themselves from getting abused again. This pattern of self-positioning is also one that is dynamic and changing that the present self-positioning can also carry a future one, that there is a self to be had in the future. The social force of this self-positioning is that they see themselves as getting there one day, having a better self or being completely healed.

Positioning of self as advocate. In this timeframe is another pattern of reflexive positioning, that of seeing themselves as doing advocacy for others. In this reflexive positioning, they no longer look at themselves but at others.

Ann positions herself as a nourisher who can nourish others who are emotionally hungry. She sees herself as a cake about to come out of the oven. She said, *“I see myself now like a cake. The ingredients are pieces of myself and all the experiences that God had allowed in my life. I am inside the oven right now nearing done. When I come out of the oven, I will be a cake... served for any occasion.”* The social force of this reflexive positioning is that others see her as someone who can extend help to others, especially those who need emotional support. It may be a step in her recovery to redeem herself and become beneficial for others.

Bret, on the other hand, positions self as a protector and defender of small children. She wants small children to enjoy being a child without worrying about their safety. *“I just want to help other kids so that they can enjoy their childhood...”* (lines 309-310). *“I want my life to be meaningful to children who should be protected”* (lines 336-337). *“I will not allow what happened to me to happen to other children”* (lines 323-324). This self-positioning carries the social force of being able to take care of others, especially small children who are unprotected. She sees her experience as having served its purpose if she can fill the needs of children for protection and prevent one to be abused.

Venus, likewise, positions herself as a counselor especially for women who were abused. She said, *“Now I see why these events happened. First, now I counsel women who experience abuse like I did... I understand why I felt like going crazy, why I wanted to kill myself. I now understand.”* (lines 617-620) *“I plan that in 5 years I will study Psychology... then I also plan to open a counseling center after that”* (lines 607 & 611). This positioning carries the social force of being able to take care of others, especially women with CSA.

This pattern of self-positioning and its corresponding social force means that now they can take care of themselves and others. The reflexive positioning of advocate indicates a person who is now free, free of the cares of taking care and protecting the self so they can think of the welfare of others.

Discussion

This study showed how adults with CSA experience position themselves across time towards recovery. Storylines/reflexive positioning were situated across three timeframes: the self during and after the abuse and revictimization, the self during help-seeking, and the self during recovery up to the present. In the first timeframe, traditional trauma storylines and reflexive positioning were observed. The second timeframe revealed agentic positioning of self during help-seeking. In the third timeframe, results show a shift in the focus away from their CSA experience towards the self and to help others. These results are firstly explained in the victim/survivor discourse in trauma literature, followed by how agency is seen and, thirdly, how the self is created through reflexive positioning.

Victim/Survivor Discourse

The self in the first and middle timeframes (during and after CSA and revictimization, and help-seeking) points to the self in relation to the abuse. Although the second timeframe is a massive shift from that of the first, the participants are still embroiled within their CSA and revictimization experiences. But towards the end or in the third timeframe, the positioning of the self is no longer tied to being abused. They are now oriented towards helping others. The focus is no longer the abused self but a new self.

The abused self corresponds to the victim discourse while the being-healed self corresponds to the survivor discourse in CSA literature. However, the new self which now seems to be free of the abused identify remains to be identified. Anderson & Hiersteiner (2008) refer to this stage as recovery—when CSA remains part of but no longer defines them, and that CSA is part of their story but no longer their life. A new term is needed to refer to this new self and identity to position these individuals appropriately.

Self as Agentic

Data further show that agency can also be shown by fleeing to a make-believe world. In trauma literature, this is viewed as symptom (avoidance, escapism, denial) (Anderson & Hiersteiner, 2008) or avoidant coping (floating off, dissociation) (Phanichrat & Townshend, 2010) leading to unhealthy outcomes. Data in this study, however, show that creating a fantasy world where the individual feels safe and

protected is a way of surviving abuses. Seen through the lens of positioning theory this stance is recognized as self-positioning that is positive. In this regard, this reflexive positioning consequently carries a positive social force, which in turn, has a positive effect on the self. This study refers to them as expressions of resiliency (see Brown et al., 2012), and should be taken into account in therapy.

Furthermore, findings in this study support the results in previous studies that the shift from victim to survivor occurs only after the individuals engage in several tasks such as developing supportive relationships, disclosure, and making meaning (Anderson & Hiersteiner, 2008; Phanichrat & Townshend, 2010; San Diego, 2010; Banyard & Williams, 2006).

Reflexive Positioning and the Self

Positioning is never fixed but are fluid and constantly changing as new experiences are integrated (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995), with new storylines, reflexive positioning, and social force. It is, therefore, possible for a person who has made a reflexive positioning of being damaged to eventually reposition the self as whole. People do not have to be stuck in unproductive positioning but can move to more productive ones when new and positive experiences are encountered. As different situations come up, it defines and redefines the self and the construction of self-identity (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). Accordingly, different selves emerge across time.

Tan and Moghaddam (1995) warned that certain storylines and reflexive positioning may become more salient to a person than others inducing them to hold on to narratives out of habit that may be very limiting. Going through the process of analyzing the storylines, reflexive positioning, and social force in therapy can free them from relatively frozen narratives so that they can construct new stories.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the reflexive positioning and the corresponding social force is another way of understanding the life journey of individuals with CSA experience. This can help therapists giving appropriate intervention. Aside from that, findings of this study suggest that it is indeed possible for women with CSA experience to shift from the positioning of self as victim to the self as survivor then to a new self beyond survivorhood. Women can reflect the end positioning of self as change agents, as advocates, as moving from an internal focus on the self to an outward focus on others, perhaps reflective of a changing identity, of seeing the multiple selves, and as a new self that is no longer tied to CSA.

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