Reviewer’s report

Title: The recovery experience of people who were sex trafficked: the thwarted journey towards goal pursuit

Version: 0 Date: 09 Sep 2018

Reviewer: Noël Busch-Armendariz

Reviewer’s report:

1. Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript, study of human trafficking service users working toward their goals. Given the paucity of recent research on this topic, and the extent to which there is a need to understand and continue to understand this group of vulnerable victims of interpersonal violence survivors and victims, a paper on this topic is potentially a useful addition to the literature. However, I believe there needs some strengthening in several key areas, particularly to make it a relevant contribution in the current context (see below).

2. Feminist perspective

While the manuscript is not specifically about women and this journal is not about women specifically, I encourage you to consider including a stronger gender analysis since nearly twice as many of your ‘service users’ were women (nine vs five). It will provide the reader with a richer more thought provoking dialog about the lives of women in the context of human trafficking in the Netherlands. It is also not insignificant that 2 were mothers (one being pregnant). In making a statement about women, you do not have to minimize that half the survivors/victims are men; it's not either or, but an and both.

3. Introduction and Literature Review

The introductory and literature paragraphs are repetitive and not particularly informative about the research focus and aims of the paper. The introduction needs to be rewritten to provide a more compelling lead-into the paper, to reduce redundancies, and to provide the reader with more information on what the paper contributes to the literature on human trafficking in general, the utilization of services, we know about human trafficking victims utilizing services, and the goals that survivors were working toward, in particular. The study also needs to be placed within the context of the changes shaping survivor's experiences of human trafficking in shelters both at the time of the study and currently.

Building from the introduction, the literature review should provide a robust analytic and empirical foundation for the study that follows. Currently, the literature builds on multiple theories and is without a sharp focus on what is known about the particular experiences of human
trafficking survivors/victims. The terminology 'service users' is unusual for perhaps a non Dutch, almost cold or non-humanist sounding and since this an international journal you may address this term as an acceptable in the Netherlands. Much of the literature reviewed is also dated. Although recent literature in this area is rather slim, there are nonetheless solid data (See below some more recent citations). These and other data also make clear the range of other challenges facing human trafficking survivors/mothers, organizations, and aspirations (historically and in the present). It should thus be possible to ground the paper much more firmly in both relevant (and more current) literature and a robust gender analysis.

4. Methods

Interviewing survivors/victims is a strength of this research. Albeit a small number of participants, their voices is significant contribution to the research. Relevant IRB approvals are also duly noted in the text, however insufficient details are provided on other aspects of the methods and methodology, and the presentation of the methods is generally confusing. It is not clear, for example, when and where the interviews were conducted, the analytical framework and how the recording was used and analyzed. It appears that your quotes are raw data, not supporting data. Also, for example, more information recruiting procedures for participants are needed. The demographics of participants (some of these are currently scattered throughout the text) - including race/ethnicity, country of origin, type of trafficking/exploitation, length of trafficking, and other details at the time of the interviews, individual future goals, etc. The description of the qualitative analytic procedures seems at odds with the data presented, which are primarily descriptive. The findings are themselves not particularly deep. That is few quotes should be used in Grounded Theory where the findings are presented and the quotes are used to ground the findings. This section is the major weakness of the manuscript. Transparency is the cornerstone of any creditable social and behavioral scientific project.

5. Results

The presentation of the qualitative findings is relatively thin and, as noted, primarily descriptive (note also that some qualitative material that should be in the results is in the discussion section). The lack of depth is a drawback given both the small sample and the extent to which the paper leans on the qualitative data in drawing implications. The findings are more robust but are reported in a way that makes it hard to keep track of main points.

6. Discussion

The discussion section needs to focus more centrally than it currently does on interpreting/contextualizing key findings in relation to both the literature and to the current context. Limitations of the study should be noted, and the implications drawn for intervention and further research. One of the limitations is certainly the small number of participants and if the authors reached saturation. I would have liked to seen a much more practical discussion about the implications for practice and policy for shelters and the like serving HT survivors and
beyond shelters what do we have to learn from this study? The Conclusion section itself didn't say anything of particular use and can be omitted altogether.

7. Overall quality and relevance of the article

With regard to writing and organization, care should be taken throughout to ensure a logical flow of information and to sharpen main points. The "core phenomenon" gets lost and is a fantastic finding that either needs to be highlighted or to be cited if it's not original.

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Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
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Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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No

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If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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