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Conversations of Abuse Against Women

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Introduction of Sources

I am a senior at Portland State University and my interest in this topic stems from my experience interning at a local women and children's shelter. Due to this interest I decided to further explore the communication individuals use when discussing abuse against women by analyzing the metaphors in those conversations. To begin I gathered examples of four different forms of text involving this matter, such as survivor blogs, blogs written by the general public discussing the survivor healing process, scholarly articles, and question and answer forums between survivors and therapists.

The survivor blogs were posted online on the Pandora's Project site, providing resources and support for survivors of rape and sexual abuse. There is a message board, chat room, testimonials, articles, essays, activists Q&A's, definitions, ways to donate, ways to get involved, and several links regarding crisis support and overall information. Blogs that reference the specific healing process of survivors I found on domestic shelters.org, consisting of, world news, statistics, surveys, employment, and information and resources on a national/global level. A couple differences between these sites are the types of submitted material. Pandora's Project wants most of their blog posts and chats to be between survivors of abuse. They also do not offer a wide range of resources nationally or globally. Visitors of Domestic shelters.org may consist of a smaller pool of individuals, possibly more survivors and less of the general public. I randomly selected two examples from each of these types of sources as I felt they would include a diverse range of metaphors, considering that the posts are submitted onto websites that are accessible by the public. I believe that the language used may be determined by the perceived audience.

One of the scholarly articles I selected was written by Frank Baird (1996), “A Narrative Context for Conversations with Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse,” from the journal of *Family Systems Research and Therapy*. The second scholarly article I reviewed was by Alexis Phillips and Judith Daniluk (2004), “Beyond Survivor: How Childhood Sexual Abuse Informs the Identity of Adult Women at the End of the Therapeutic Process,” from the *Journal of Counseling & Development*. These scholarly articles represent a middle ground. They include a small amount of individual stories and advice and are more focused on discussing the therapeutic and identity development processes. I felt that the metaphors included in these pieces would communicate different concepts as they are not written from a personal angle, opposed to the blogs and Q & A’s with therapists.

The last set of sources I referenced were question and answer forums on psychcentral.com. This site offers information about various forms of abuse and disorders, blogs and forums created and directed by field experts, a resource directory, and info on medications and support groups. There is also great amount of information regarding general health issues separate from situational occurrences such as abuse against women. I would assume this creates a highly diverse audience of the site, with visitors that do and do not struggle with a range of health issues. The specific pieces I analyzed were survivors seeking advice from therapists. Kristina Randle, Ph.D., LCSW and Holly Counts, Psy.D were the two doctors who responded to the survivor questions I randomly selected. The Q & A columns between therapists and survivors provide a contrast in metaphorical examples aside the other sources. I used them as a staple comparison to the other three groups of texts. This was the only type of source where the survivor was portrayed as vulnerable and a victim of her circumstance; representing herself as such as

well. I believe this influences the metaphors used by the victim/survivor and the therapist. Different conceptualizations and metaphors will be used to communicate victim vulnerability and emphasize the therapists clear notion that they need support. Analyzing the metaphors in these samples sheds light on how the tone of individual's communication regarding abuse against women can impact the metaphorical usage. The question and answer forums present a new range of metaphorical use that is based on asking for and providing support. This context inspires defenseless metaphor usage rather than metaphors that communicate confidence in survivor/victim healing that are used in the previous samples.

Construction & Stories

In analyzing the metaphors among each of these sources, I discovered similarities as well as several differences regarding the types of metaphors and words and phrases that were used and the potential meanings they embody. One of the common metaphors throughout the survivor blog posts, healing blog posts, and scholarly articles, was "construction." The specific word changed, although the conceptualizations of the word remained the same, such as "construction," "re-construction," "forming," "rebuild," and "build."

In the first blog post, "Healing Your Inner Child," by Melinda, she explains that women should "build that relationship" between a woman and her inner child (2009, p. 4). Melinda is metaphorically representing the inner child as an adult's child self who was abused. Even though the survivor is not experiencing abuse anymore, she can still suffer from the thoughts/memories of the past abusive occurrences. Those thoughts/memories are symbolically the survivor as a child. Melinda is suggesting that for one to heal overall they must start from the roots within. In paragraph three, "Build" means "to form by ordering and uniting materials by gradual means into a composite whole" (Merriam-Webster,1828). Melinda is metaphorically representing the

interpersonal relationship with her inner abused child as something that can gradually be improved when it is constructed from the beginning; similarly to a building. Conceptually feelings have become objects. Things that we can physically touch to construct and or “build” up can also be torn down. The disrupted feelings that childhood abuse causes is what Melinda explained as a young girl being lost. In the bio on her blog post she wrote, “LittleGirlLost to a woman found.” Being lost is to be “taken away or beyond reach or attainment” (Merriam-Webster,1828). Metaphorically Melinda means that she is no longer that young child. The woman she represents now is “found.” She has grown from her past abusive experiences which have contributed to the woman she is today. Whether she was physically little or not, Melinda’s innocence was expressed as a point where growth began.

The conceptual metaphor communicated here is that humans are objects. We can be misplaced and found again when the time is right; realizing we can overcome all we have struggled with. There is a story beneath this conceptual metaphor as well. In every fairy tale the girl or woman becomes either physically or emotionally lost in her current way of life. For example, in the story of Cinderella, she is treated as a slave to her family due to the presence of her step-mother and sisters. It is not until the fairy godmother appears to show her a new side of life that she is given the opportunity to change her current situation. Regardless of the underlying sexism of these films, the conceptual metaphor of losing oneself to then eventually find ones way again to become the woman she wishes to be, is present in this survivor blog post. This overarching metaphor of “construction,” where humans and feelings are objects, continues in the blog posts providing insight on survivor healing.

On domesticshelters.org, Connie Sloane, a member of the general public, created a blog post describing the process of women survivors of abuse healing process, “How to Go From Surviving to Thriving After Abuse.” She explains in paragraph one that leaving abusive relationships involves “rebuilding self-esteem” (2015, p. 1). To rebuild is to “make repairs to” (Merriam-Webster, 1828). Self-esteem cannot literally be built, although metaphorically self-esteem is an object, consisting of parts that need repaired to make the esteem of women who have been abused whole again. She also describes this time of healing as similar to a houseplant that is not in the correct place for growth, “Its leaves are limp, its color is dull and it looks as if it isn’t going to make it. However, when watered regularly and moved to a spot where it receives the right amount of sunlight, the plant becomes healthy and beautiful” (2015, p. 1).

This is metaphorically representing human emotions as organic, needing daily attention and care to remain healthy. Similar to the survivor blog post, a story is represented by this conceptual metaphor of humans being objects. For example flowers are placed across individual’s grave stones to resemble acceptance of death and appreciation of another’s life. We also give flowers to those we love or to a friend who has moved into a new place of residence to provide best wishes in their new chapter in life. Live organic objects represent continuous growth, opposed to dead flowers or plants that can symbolize an overall toxic environment or failed relationship.

The conceptual metaphor of feelings and humans being objects continues in the scholarly articles discussing treatments for survivors/victims of abuse and identity development. Phillips and Daniluk (2004) explain the impacts of childhood abuse on adult women’s identity, that as an adult she is “forming an identity” again (Phillips & Daniluk, 2004, p. 177). A form is “the shape

and structure of something as distinguished from its material” (Merriam-Webster, 1828), metaphorically representing the process of deciding and developing who one is from nothing to something. The phrase, “Construction of a healthy sense of self” (Phillips & Daniluk, 2004, p. 177) was also mentioned as a challenge for most women. Similar to the metaphorical use of “forming,” the construction of something is to join pieces together creating wholeness; referencing a woman’s healthy mentality. Conceptually a person is an object as well as they’re feelings, which can be built from the ground up. As recognized in the previous sources, human beings lives and way of life representing objects communicate a story.

Baird's (1996) piece addresses this conceptual metaphor regarding narrative therapy as a form of treatment for women who have experienced abuse. Narrative Therapy, based on a theory of interpretation, involves survivors who are still suffering from the setbacks of abuse to conceptualize their life as a story to read and re-write (1996, p. 5). The concept of survivor/victims lives representing stories to be read and re-written in pursuit of healing, is used throughout the entire piece. Baird (1996) initially labeled this journey, that he believes all survivors should embrace, as re-constructing the dominant story (1996, p. 7). To “re-construct” is to construct again and or to re-build. The dominant story is “the pre-packaged meanings provided by the cultural and historical milieu into which she was born” (Baird, 1996, p. 5). Essentially it is the teachings, values, and overall cultural upbringing of a survivor. In this context the dominant story becomes a personified metaphor. By reconstructing the dominant story, a woman must re-conceptualize the way she envisions her current life that is impacted by her past abuse. The reshaping of her present will turn into her own dominant story. The phrase used for describing this process was “re-authoring a new story” (Baird, 1996, p. 10). Reauthoring is to create once again, to start fresh. Baird (1996) also said that, “Rather than the problem remaining fixed in her life, the survivor and

the problem are alive, active, changing and changeable” (1996, p. 9). Baird personifies a problem as “having life,” metaphorically giving the problem the same freedoms as a person. For instance the problem is its own entity opposed to the survivor being the problem; the problem and survivor are healing together.

The survivor blog posts, blog posts regarding survivor healing, and scholarly articles discussing formation of identity and treatment options each include the metaphor “construction” by using the specific word or one similar to portray the same meaning. This concept of building an object from the ground up correlates to the conceptual metaphors, feelings are objects and humans are objects, which are present in all three sources. Humans and feelings are objects that are disposable, breakable, and can be reconstructed to become whole and healthy. In all three sources, when a woman and her life were represented as objects her true feelings were emphasized through story metaphors. For example an individual experiencing any form of turbulence in their life can say they feel “torn up” or “bruised,” although simple metaphors do not do survivors of abuse justice; opposed to the usage of story metaphors that paint a broad picture of the true survivor feeling and healing process.

Personified Enemy

Among the survivor blogs, healing process blogs, scholarly articles, and question and answer forums between survivors and therapists, each pair of sources involved personified metaphors representing an enemy. The form of enemy changed depending on the source. The only piece that remained consistent was the fact that the enemy was in some way related to a survivor’s past or present experience of abuse.

In the general survivor blogs, the enemy that the survivors metaphorically described was the specific abuse. Louise for example, in her blog “Older People Surviving Child Sexual

Abuse,” discusses how she deals with her past child sexual abuse trauma as a woman of older age. Her past experiences become objects, consistent with the theme of feelings being objects. She says, “The abuse invades every facet of one’s sexuality” (2010, p. 4). To invade means “to enter for conquest or plunder” (Merriam-Webster, 1828). Her experiences are now personified. Child abuse is seen as something that can control how a woman sexually views herself and every aspect related to how she experiences sexuality as an adult. Although to invade is still not to completely destroy. It is a term that is typically used for military purpose. There is the intention to gain complete control of an area with the possibility of destroying whatever resides at that location. For the abuse to invade a survivor’s sexuality, that still leaves hope for the survivor to eventually escape from that.

The enemy referenced in the blog posts discussing the healing process of survivors was personified fear and uncertainty. In Katy’s blog, “Why Child Abuse Can Never Be Your Fault,” she metaphorically personifies fear saying, “What a powerful silencer fear and uncertainty can be.” For one to be silenced is not to be rid of rather it is to lose one’s voice. A voice is necessary to communicate our feelings, ideas, opinions, and it is something we use to defend ourselves. If fear and uncertainty, which are feelings personified as enemies, silence a victim of abuse, there is still opportunity for her to re-gain her voice. The use of the term “silencer” instead of a word that communicates definite termination, provides the woman victim of abuse with hope that she can still survive her circumstance.

In Baird’s (1996) piece he personifies the enemy as a plague, he says a survivor’s past experiences of abuse are a “problem that plagues her” (Baird, 1996, p. 4). A plague metaphorically refers to a survivor’s memories as being continuously painful opposed to a temporary hurt. A plague causes people to suffer. The spreading of the disease is persistent. The dominant story,

which I previously defined as the teachings, values, and overall cultural upbringing of a victim/survivor, contribute to her past experiences of abuse. Her dominant story is a causation for why the past abuse may “plague” her. This dominant story is as well personified. It is the inner voice and or person the survivor battles with in being able to re-write her dominant story to reflect her current and soon to be healthy life. A survivor’s past experiences personified as the plague communicates that her past abuse is consistently impacting her everyday thoughts and healing process. There is little opportunity to escape, although it is still possible. The dominant story symbolizing a person that the survivor has inner conflicts with, is also an enemy that will not end her life. The extremity of the enemy that a victim/survivor of abuse envisions in relation to her chances of healing, depends on the context of conversation.

Q & A Forums

In my samples of conversations between therapists and survivors, there were zero similarities between these pieces of dialogue and the ones discussed previously. The metaphor “construction” and the use of stories to communicate this rebuilding and growth, while feelings and humans become objects, was common among all of the samples of conversations previously discussed, other than the therapist and survivor dialogues. In these question and answer forums, the survivor was consistently painted as a victim of her circumstance. On the website PsychCentral, an anonymous survivor of abuse asked Dr. Holly Counts her opinion of confronting her past abuser in the conversation “Should I Confront My Emotional Abuser?” (2016). The anonymous survivor said, “I felt like I was accepting every crumb of affection” (p.2). This conceptually references affection that this woman hopes to receive as nourishment, something to ingest. Rather

than this anonymous survivor saying they feel “broken,” as pieces can always be put back together. Expressing that she will accept anything means that she is at her lowest point. The survivor is needing whatever necessary to get by, there is nothing to re-construct there.

Furthermore, the survivor debates this confrontation with their abuser saying it will continue to “eat away” at her if she doesn't (2016, p. 2). This relation of the abuse and negativity the survivor experiences as something that could ingest her is a personified enemy. A predator, acid, and or a disease are things that can accomplish such and are deadly. The personified enemy is fatal in this instance as the survivor is in a place of vulnerability by looking to another for advice. Conversely the personified enemies in the other samples of texts were escapable, as the writers of those pieces were in a place of power by only sharing their experiences or findings. Dr. Counts replied to the plea of lack of confrontation “eating away” at the survivor by saying “wrap yourself with support” (2016, p. 3). Items that individuals wrap around themselves are blankets, things that provide protection. Dr. Counts suggesting that she focus on supporting herself, means that the survivor/victim must accept that she needs support. This inner acceptance of support highlights that the survivor is a victim of her past and present.

In the dialogue presented by a survivor of abuse addressed to Dr. Kristina Randle, “My Boss Harassed Me and Now I Think I Have Started Having Feelings for Him, Which Make Me Sick,” metaphors portraying survivor weakness were incorporated similarly to the previous sample. The survivor/victim mentions that this was her “first shot in the corporate world” (2016, p. 1). “Shot,” is “an action of shooting” (Merriam-Webster, 1828). She also mentions that she is unsure as to if she will survive in this “cut throat world” (2016, p. 1). The throat is a vulnerable area on the body, cutting ones throat would be fatal. These metaphors create a deadly edge for

the survivor in the world with their abuser. They imply that they are at the mercy of their surroundings, which accentuates a victim role. The survivor then continues to say, “when a guy, even for the wrong reasons said he likes me, I melted” (2016, p. 2). To “melt” means that something loses all structure. Metaphorically this woman “melts” when shown an expression of like from another man, as her perception of genuine interest is tainted. To be melted is to become a vulnerable substance, something that cannot be put back together opposed to being “shattered.” She lost all structure and or knowledge as to how to negatively respond to those that possess bad intentions behind their “like” for her. Conceptually this shows that our normal interactions impact each other.

The conversations between therapists and survivors do not include metaphors or concepts similar to that of the survivor blogs, scholarly articles, and healing posts. Instead of metaphorically representing a survivor’s feelings and well-being as an object to be constructed in hopes of healing and reaching self-discovery, the survivor remains at a weak place. She feels she lacks the inner strength to be healed completely. The therapist recognizes this, wanting her to accept support. The other three samples of dialogue grant the survivor with inner power and the chance of coming out of her circumstance as a new person with a healthy life to live. In the question and answer columns with therapists and survivors, the survivors think of themselves as constant victims of their circumstance and the therapists also see them as such. Rather than a survivor working towards building themselves up, the survivors remain in a vulnerable position, and this position becomes concrete when they looking to a “professional” for help. The therapists are in a position of power. They expect to witness this vulnerability, as it is their job so administer advice.

Discussion

When analyzing these four different samples, I made the conclusions that the relatability the writers of the scholarly articles, survivor blogs, and healing blogs had to the topic of female abuse led to self-awareness. This self-awareness influenced the language used in the three dialogues and specifically the metaphors incorporated. In the question and answer forums, the lack of reliability the survivors/victims of abuse had to the therapists and the lack of reliability the therapists had to the survivors/victims, led to a focus on the experienced abuse. The abuse became a hinderance rather than a tool for healing. This as well influenced the language in the dialogues and metaphors used.

In the blog posts written by women survivors of abuse, the blogs discussing healing methods, and the general scholarly articles, there was a general theme of using the experienced abuse as fuel to grow and eventually build a new healthy life. Essentially, the goal is to not forget about experienced abuse, instead recognize it. Louise in her blog “Older People Surviving Child Sexual Abuse,” discusses how she deals with her past child sexual abuse trauma as a woman of older age. She mentions that when thinking about past experiences of abuse and their ability to impact one’s present life, it is crucial to “get through it not over it” (2010, p. 8). One’s history of child abuse is not literally a barrier to move over. That is an action that seems far too simple, which is the point that Louise was making. Although a woman cannot literally “get through” her trauma, metaphorically she is using her experiences as part of her healing process.

Katy who posted a blog concerning survivor healing, “Why child abuse can NEVER be your fault,” verbalized her own experience, “As I’ve said, for me, as I entered into the healing process...” (2009, p. 3). Katy is expressing that healing is a journey. In this case, Katy is referring to coming into the process of healing, metaphorically meaning she is entering a new space and starting from the beginning. Similar to the general blog posts, the metaphors that are used in

these posts are directed towards creating a healthy life and becoming a new and improved version of thyself. This is something that will occur in time, as it is a process.

Baird's (1996) discussion of Narrative Therapy as a form of treatment and or conversational context for survivor healing and Phillips and Daniluk's (2004) piece on survivor identity development are both articles directed towards a positive outcome and include similar concepts related to all three of these dialogues. Baird's (1996) piece specifically utilized metaphors and metaphorical conceptualizations that represent a survivor's experience of abuse as a tool to heal rather than something that impedes a woman's ability to re-create her quality of life. For example the metaphor, "re-authoring a new story" (Baird, 1996, p. 10), provides a survivor with the most power over her past and present. She becomes strong by holding the title of an "author," her survivor story is her life. Re-writing a life would involve re-conceptualizing relationships, goals, ambitions, experiences, hurt, love, happiness, etc. Although we cannot control all aspects of life, we forget that we have the power to edit some pieces. Baird's (1996) statement that, "Rather than the problem remaining fixed in her life, the survivor and the problem are alive, active, changing and changeable" (1996, p. 9). This summarizes this concept of a survivor's ability to exit their past and use their experiences to fully heal. As I mentioned previously, the use of these metaphors separate the problem and the survivor. The survivor is healing singularly, while the problem remains a piece of the past and a healing tool for the present.

Conversely, the question and answer forums displayed the moment in women who have experienced abuse lives where they remain a victim of their circumstance. The speakers in those dialogues lack a connection with each other, resulting in a focus on the abuse as a problem. The survivors/victim is also coming from a place of vulnerability and potential weakness in accepting

they need help from another who is assumed to be experienced in their field. These factors impact the metaphors that the therapist and the survivor/victim use. Even if the occurrence is in the past and she is labeled a survivor, the way she or an outsider may discuss her experiences and current state does not always match this “survivor” title. To her or another she may still be a victim to the past abuse.

The general survivor blogs, blogs directed towards the healing of survivors, and the scholarly articles show a different dynamic, incorporating metaphorical conceptualizations of power given back to the survivor. The connection the author of each of these dialogues has to the topic area of female abuse contributes to this inclusion of metaphors representing growth. Some of the authors were survivors of abuse, some were individuals with interest in the topic, and for some female abuse is their area of study. When speaking about a topic that is related to a personal area of study or experience, the attitude that there is a way out from the damage abuse can cause is more likely to be focused on and spoken about. These first three types of female abuse conversations provide a survivor with the ability to “construct” a new way of life and identity. Rather than illustrating a plea for help, these pieces were written with the self-awareness that the way experienced abuse impacts a woman’s current well-being depends on the way she envisions it.

What About Society

Studying the metaphors used in dialogues of female abuse provided insight into how these conversations can be improved in specifically counseling and everyday communication. In the question and answer columns we saw that the therapists and victims/survivors used metaphors that enhanced their positioning. The therapists mention their own clinical experience, support the survivor/victim to ask for help when needed, and make it clear that they understand why

the individual feels such way. If therapists were to place less emphasis on positioning and rather an emphasis on client personal and emotional goals, I believe that the client would benefit more from their therapeutic experience. The abuse must be seen as a tool not a hindrance. This method of counseling can only be implemented if the therapist reaches the realization that their personal success, position in society, and the professional relationship they aspire to build and maintain with their client, will not be negatively impacted based on their change of communication style.

In relation to communication, we separate ourselves from experiences and topics of conversation that make us feel uncomfortable, upset, sad, or pushed outside of our comfort zone. This separation is created as we want to be around people and environments that make us feel good. That creation of distance is inspired by our fear of judgment by association. We fear judgment from the outer world based on our potential association to those topics of conversation and experiences that give us an uncomfortable feeling. Individuals like to display the best versions of themselves, without any ties to lifestyles or experiences that have the potential to make them appear unworthy in this game of life. I feel individuals should resist their automatic response to separate themselves from experiences and topics of conversations that push their emotional limits. We should stay tuned and or present a little longer than we normally would. By doing so we will learn a great deal about one another, our conversations will be richer, and our ability to expand our horizons and grow as people will become clearer.

Future Research

Considering that this is a text analysis opposed to a research paper, further research could be completed in this area of work regarding the power of personal connections to various topics. A study should be designed to see how the language one uses in conversations is influenced by their relatability to the subject area.

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