

Common Threads: Story Cloths for Healing Trauma

Abstract

In communities across the globe, currently and historically, women and girls live with the profound consequences of violence that's been perpetrated on their communities and against them personally. Women's bodies have been the battlefield on which war has been waged, and the brutality often continues after war has ended. Survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) face stigma, silencing, shame, and lack of support as they struggle to recover. Common Threads focuses on GBV issues in communities in need; the World Health Organization states that "Sexual violence is a serious public health and human rights problem with both short- and long-term consequences on women's physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health." (www.who.int). The Common Threads project supports the creation of powerful images and the use of easily available materials (cloth, needle, and thread) to promote and strengthen communities through the collective visual storytelling.

Sewing groups have long been a spontaneous way that women have empowered themselves, telling their stories to each other and to the larger community through images made on and of cloth. Chilean women's politically-charged *arpilleras* about lost loved ones and the abuses by Pinochet's military were instrumental in gaining worldwide recognition of the thousands of "disappeared" family members who were kidnapped and never seen again (Agosin, 1996; Sepulveda, 1996). In South Africa, women have chronicled their experiences, through story cloths, of human rights abuses during the apartheid years and beyond (Cooke & MacDowell, 2005; Bijoux, 2014, personal correspondence). Narrative textile-making offers a promising opportunity for emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual healing, as well as progressing beyond simply surviving toward thriving (Papadopoulos, 2007; Tedeschi, 1996).

Common Threads is a pilot narrative sewing project incorporating art therapy experientials, mind/body exercises, and quantitative and qualitative measurements to assess the effectiveness of narrative sewing groups in helping to improve the participants' well-being. Groups meet weekly for 12 weeks, with sessions lasting approximately two hours. A strategic protocol of evidence-based psychotherapeutic intervention was designed, and in collaboration with local teams of facilitators, integrated into the group's sewing activities. While the protocol may vary by setting, they include some or all of the following: group skills: understanding and managing extreme distress, art therapy techniques, working with memories of extreme adversity, and exhibition of work for advocacy purposes in the community or beyond, depending on the participant's wishes. Changes are monitored from baseline information gathered before the group convenes, at the end of the 12 weeks, and at 4 months after completing the sessions. Factors to be assessed include resiliency, adaptive functioning, mood, self-efficacy, and presence of trauma-related symptoms; self-reports from participants are also elicited.

Creating narrative textiles in a group facilitates healing by providing a sense of safety, connecting to others, stress reduction, self-expression, skill building, strengthening pride in cultural identity and encouraging a sense of personal and collective power. Details and efficacy results will be shared during the workshop; participants will also experience the physical, psychological, and community aspects of creating their own story using cloth.

References

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