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Cultural Competence of Western Psychotherapists in Helping Sex Trade Survivors: An Initial Exploration

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Abstract

Sex-trafficking survivors that come from the Developing world and who become free in the west, can receive help from western psychotherapists. A therapist who is able to provide help to a former sex-slave of this origin is answering to a need for culturally competent mental health professionals. To serve this goal, the author analyses the example of Nigerian women who become free in the west and provides information about their background that could be useful in session. Parallel to this discussion, the question of whether cross-cultural differences can be overcome in therapy in an ethical way arises.

Cultural Competence of Western Psychotherapists in Helping Sex Trade Survivors: the Example of Nigerian Women

Being a western therapist who is working with a sex-trade survivor that was born in a different continent than their own can be similar to operating on a tumor that is not visible to the naked eye. Much like a surgeon who is working blindly to outsmart the mass, a western therapist is called to help in unknown cultural territory. Tala, a 24-year-old Nigerian woman who had survived sex trafficking, was sent to a refugee camp after the authorities found her wandering the streets of a Greek village in 2016. Despite the increased efforts of therapists to help her, she shared next to nothing and she denied all offers made to her. A physical examination showed signs of rape and abuse but when asked by the police, she still did not disclose information.

Tala's story survived through the recollections of a Ghanaian woman who met her in the camp. Two weeks after her arrival, Tala confided in her the decision she had made to return to the house where she had escaped from. It was then that the woman realized that the girl had never escaped slavery; she was still held psychologically captive through a mind-game in which she was convinced that spirits would kill her family back in Nigeria. Although a Christian herself, the Ghanaian woman was aware of the religious and/or spiritual beliefs, including juju,

across the African continent that were used by traffickers to manipulate survivors. In a ritual in which they took pieces of Tala's hair and some saliva, they swore her to abide to everything they said and to never expose them to legal agents. Tala was thus coerced to perform sex work in Europe to help her family out. If she broke this spiritual contract, her father and her younger brother who both lived in Nigeria would be fatally tormented, not by humans but by the spirits surrounding them. Tala left the camp a few days later and she has not returned since.

To mental health professionals who work with foreign sex trafficking survivors, disappearance of the client is something not uncommon. Literature depicts such few cases of former sex slaves that were able to follow consistent post-traumatic therapy, that practitioners have minimal guidance in helping these clients. Being able to help a Nigerian woman who survived sex trafficking in a western country however can show the potential of psychotherapy to surpass cross-cultural impediments and is worthy of scientific attention.

A question often expressed to mental health professionals by clients is "How can you know what I am going through? Have you been through anything similar?" At first caught off guard, therapists grow confident with time in responding that for what they may lack in experience, they make up in empathy. After all, does a cardio surgeon need to have survived a heart attack to be able to operate?

This response however is radically brought down when a therapist is confronted with the absolute unknown. Human trafficking, the enlistment, commission, transmission and admission of humans through blackmailing, power games, fraudulent activities, kidnapping, physical and emotional abuse, as well as the control of one individual over another and his or her abuse for financial gains of the former, that can be organized to sell sex workers, low cost workers, slaves, as well as organ donors¹ is, undoubtedly, a source of uneasiness to the western therapist. In accepting to see a Nigerian female that has escaped international sex trade, a psychologist is immediately reminded of the fact that all their scientific expertise is only applicable to the western world. Can he, a human who has not been through similar experiences, be of help to a survivor of man-made torture? In undertaking the challenging task of helping a survivor of human trafficking who has been exploited as a sex worker, a therapist of the western world must realize the inextricable bounds between the former's behavior and their cultural background.² Trafficked girls of Asian origin form an excellent example of a population whose reactions to trafficking are lamented by their culture. Emerging

¹ L. (n.d.). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Retrieved from <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>

² Marshall H. Segall. "Culture and Behavior: Psychology in Global Perspective." *Annual Review of Psychology* 37 (1986): 523-64.

from a background that historically values males and views girls as a tradable commodity and having been raised to place contributing to their families' finances to the highest regard, Asian girls not only consent to be trafficked for sex work but also refuse to return home when they haven't accrued sufficient income. These practices along with the stigma of having been raped or having worked as prostitutes that drives these women's families to reject them, keeping them in a helpless situation.³

Nigerian women who have survived sex trafficking, form another example of women who report to have gained little from western therapists who are uninformed of their ethnic and cultural roots.⁴ Something important to mention however, is that they have become free in a country such as the United States, where funded recovery programs exist.⁵ This is an opportunity that they may not have had in their homeland. To help a Nigerian woman, a western mental health professional should grow "culturally competent", which means appreciate the gravity and the impact of these women's culture in their lives, be able to communicate in a language that they both understand, acknowledge the significance of the women's decision to ask for help given their traditional background, as well as ensure that all therapeutic approaches the professional applies are tailored specifically to their needs.⁶

Additionally to developing cultural competence which is considered a more technical approach of the issue, "cultural humility" moves deeper into decreasing cross-cultural differences between the therapist and the Nigerian female client. This term illustrates a power-shifting approach that serves to be a check on the therapist's power and trusts the expertise of the client on her own experiences instead of assuming that the therapist better understands what she has been through. The western therapist is thus called to focus on building a relationship

³ Rita Chi-Ying Chung. "Cultural Perspectives on Child Trafficking, Human Rights & Social Justice: A Model for Psychologists." *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2009): 85-96. doi:10.1080/09515070902761230.

⁴ C. S. Rosen, C. J. Greene, H. E. Young, and F. H. Norris. "Tailoring Disaster Mental Health Services to Diverse Needs: An Analysis of 36 Crisis Counseling Projects." *Health & Social Work* 35, no. 3 (2010): 211-20. doi:10.1093/hsw/35.3.211.

⁵ Rebecca J. Macy, and Natalie Johns. "Aftercare Services for International Sex Trafficking Survivors: Informing U.S. Service and Program Development in an Emerging Practice Area." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 12, no. 2 (2010): 87-98. doi:10.1177/1524838010390709.

⁶ C. S. Rosen, C. J. Greene, H. E. Young, and F. H. Norris. "Tailoring Disaster Mental Health Services to Diverse Needs: An Analysis of 36 Crisis Counseling Projects." *Health & Social Work* 35, no. 3 (2010): 211-20. doi:10.1093/hsw/35.3.211.

with the Nigerian woman that will allow for her to openly share her thoughts and feelings without fear of being judged.⁷

To help this cultural dialogue, mental health professionals should not only research information about their clients' pathological symptoms but also about these women's ethnic, cultural and moral background.⁸ An example of a therapist applying cultural information to the treatment of their client is that of Vindbjerg and his team who suggested that Arab refugees have a distinct symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that is not included in current psychological manuals. That is, they consciously avoid uncomfortable feelings following a traumatic event. While western populations organically cannot remember information about a distressing event they have experienced⁹, displaced Arabs try to abide to their culture according to which they should not acknowledge their pain. Vindbjerg and his colleagues suggest that even psychological disorders differ among ethnic groups. A war survivor who meets the criteria for a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis for example, does not suffer equally to a New Yorker who can be diagnosed with the same disorder after surviving a robbery. It is not only the nature of the traumatic event but also what preceded it that affects the experience of distress. War survivors are often familiarized to trauma through consistent and repeated exposure to physical and emotional torment, sexual abuse and the mourning of loved ones. They also suffer the death of their community as well as the extinction of their hopes and dreams for the future.¹⁰

In helping an individual who has been through ongoing conflict, a therapist should keep in mind that they may never have experienced normality in the way that it is defined in the west. Their experiences with trauma however, should not underestimate their capacity to live a normal life. In fact, instead of addressing their clients' experiences as something to be overcome, therapists could shift their focus and view them as a source of considerable strength, resilience and appreciation of peace, unknown to someone who was brought up in a different environment.

⁷ Teeta T. Tormala, Sita G. Patel, Ellen E. Soukup, and Annette V. Clarke. "Developing Measurable Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility: An Application of the Cultural Formulation." *Training and Education in Professional Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2018): 54-61.

⁸ Michael Knipper. "Joining Ethnography and History in Cultural Competence Training." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 37, no. 2 (2013): 373-84. doi:10.1007/s11013-013-9315-1.

⁹ Erik Vindbjerg, Jessica Carlsson, Erik Lykke Mortensen, Ask Elklit, and Guido Makransky. "The Latent Structure of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder among Arabic-speaking Refugees Receiving Psychiatric Treatment in Denmark." *BMC Psychiatry* 16, no. 1 (2016). doi:10.1186/s12888-016-0936-0.

¹⁰ Erik Vindbjerg, Jessica Carlsson, Erik Lykke Mortensen, Ask Elklit, and Guido Makransky. "The Latent Structure of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder among Arabic-speaking Refugees Receiving Psychiatric Treatment in Denmark." *BMC Psychiatry* 16, no. 1 (2016). doi:10.1186/s12888-016-0936-0.

As follows, a psychotherapist trained and working in a country such as the United States of America can in fact help a Nigerian woman that was un-enslaved in America. To facilitate such an attempt, this article presents information about the Nigerian culture that may be useful in therapy, along with suggestions on how they can help create an effective therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client.

As other refugees, some Nigerian women are susceptible to sexual exploitation mainly due to their scarce economic resources, their neglected place in society as well as the patriarchal culture they have been brought up in, that has raised them to be subservient to their surrounding males.¹¹ They also form one of the many groups of people being trafficked from Africa due to globalization and due to some characteristics of the African continent. Political corruption, unethical leaders, recurring wars and crises, financial and public health devastations are only a few of the reasons that leave African citizens no choice but to sell their bodies for money.¹² Feelings of financial powerlessness lead parents to send their children abroad for a safe future while in these children end up being sexually abused¹³ and women to travel to America and to European countries in pursuit of professional opportunities, where they are instead trapped and enslaved into sex work.¹⁴

In Nigeria, poverty combined with gender related inequity and discrimination¹⁵, leads women to seek employment and to be cross-border human trafficking.¹⁶ The financial demands of poor multi-membered homes¹⁷, along with the custom of impoverished Nigerian families to send their children as foster members of rich families across the African continent¹⁸, has radically worsened the bane of slavery and sex trade in the country. With more than half a million women

¹¹ Natividad G. Chong. "Human Trafficking and Sex Industry: Does Ethnicity and Race Matter?" *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 35, no. 2 (2014): 196-213.

¹² Browne Onuoha. "The State Human Trafficking and Human Rights Issues in Africa." *Contemporary Justice Review* 14, no. 2 (2011): 149-66.

¹³ Aderanti Adepoju. "Review of Research and Data on Human Trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa." *International Migration* 43, no. 1-2 (2005): 75-98. doi:10.1111/j.0020-7985.2005.00313.x.

¹⁴ Ademola K. Fayemi. "The Challenges of Prostitution and Female Trafficking in Africa: An African Ethno-Feminist Perspective." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009): 200-13.

¹⁵ Nlierum S. Okogbule. "Combating the "New Slavery" in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Legal and Policy Responses to Human Trafficking." *Journal of African Law* 57, no. 1 (2013): 57-80.

¹⁶ Oluyemi O. Fayomi. "Women, Poverty and Trafficking: A Contextual Exposition of the Nigerian Situation." *Journal of Management and Social Sciences* 5, no. 1, 65-79.

¹⁷ Linus Akor. "Trafficking of Women in Nigeria: Causes, Consequences and the Way Forward." *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 2, no. 2 (2011): 89-110.

¹⁸ Victoria I. Nwogu. "Nigeria: Human Trafficking and Migration." *Forced Migration Review* 25 (2006): 32-33.

being trafficked for sex to the United States and to Europe annually¹⁹, Nigerians form the largest group of people from countries under-development that are being sold in the west, while financial gains from human trafficking in Nigeria are only surpassed by profits made by gun and narcotic trade.²⁰ Commercial paths that are accessible through the Sahara facilitates human trafficking and renders Nigeria a location of slave emission and passage²¹, as well as a terminal that accepts slaves to work.²²

A well-established type of human trafficking is also formed by Nigerian “baby factories”. With femaleness, directly associated to being able to get pregnant in Nigerian culture, infertile couples from Nigeria secretly purchase newborns and pretend that they are their own. Not uncommon is the tendency for couples from the west to take advantage of such a system and to buy children, instead of going through an adoption process. Selling babies is a way to make a large amount of money in a quick manner and thus human traffickers either impregnate enslaved women and make them give up their babies, or trap women who have gotten pregnant without being married, a morally punishable condition in Nigeria, and force them to sell their newborns in these baby factories.²³ With the babies that are not purchased, traffickers create a group of humans who can also grow to be trafficked for sex.²⁴ These babies don’t need to reach an adult age before being exploited, since child-sex trafficking is a common practice in the country. Children and especially girls who have, surprisingly, attended school, who have been away from their parents, in foster homes or in arranged marriages and who have already been sexually abused are considered profitable sex workers for traffickers.²⁵

The “right to be trafficked”, also known as “le droit de l’homme” is another force that facilitates child and teenage sex trafficking. A common belief in Africa teenagers, is that they have the right to claim independence from their oppressing parents’ control. For this reason, children among others flee from Togo in West

¹⁹ Linus Akor. "Trafficking of Women in Nigeria: Causes, Consequences and the Way Forward." *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 2, no. 2 (2011): 89-110.

²⁰ Victoria I. Nwogu. "Nigeria: Human Trafficking and Migration." *Forced Migration Review* 25 (2006): 32-33.

²¹ Neil Howard. "Promoting ‘Healthy Childhoods’ and Keeping Children ‘At Home’: Beninese Anti-Trafficking Policy in Times of Neoliberalism." *International Migration* 51, no. 4 (2013): 87-102. doi:10.1111/imig.12043.

²² Nlierum S. Okogbule. "Combating the "New Slavery" in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Legal and Policy Responses to Human Trafficking." *Journal of African Law* 57, no. 1 (2013): 57-80.

²³ Olusesan Ayodeji Makinde, Clifford Obby Odimegwu, and Stella O. Babalola. "Reasons for Infertile Couples Not to Patronize Baby Factories." *Health & Social Work* 42, no. 1 (2016): 57-59. doi:10.1093/hsw/hlw054.

²⁴ Olusesan Ayodeji Makinde. "Infant Trafficking and Baby Factories: A New Tale of Child Abuse in Nigeria." *Child Abuse Review* 25, no. 6 (2015): 433-43. doi:10.1002/car.2420.

²⁵ Nigeria. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/countries/2018/282722.htm>

Africa and land to Nigeria where they voluntarily agree to be trafficked as a pathway to freedom. A tendency mostly present after extended periods of dictatorship “the right to be trafficked” is seen as an emancipating act while it actually ends up in sex slavery.²⁶

Either being groomed to enter the international sex trade or already knowing what they will be doing but willing to commit to it anyway in exchange for money sent to their families, Nigerian women contact “madams”. These are previously imprisoned prostitutes who have been able to pay-off their debts to their own traffickers and to purchase girls to become their slaves. Central to the Nigerian sex trafficking system that is run by entire families and that is often undetectable by authorities, madams present themselves to susceptible women as the helpers that pay the cost of their transportation and that grant them travel documents that will allow them to leave Nigeria and work for an unspecified while to pay them off.²⁷ In what seems to be a fair business deal, trafficked women actually agree to work in order to pay off a debt of thousands of dollars for many years.²⁸

It is in these early stages of trafficking that culture is used to render Nigerian women captive for years on end and it is these tactics that a western therapist should be educated about when attempting to help them. Based on traditional African religion that employs mystic powers and spiritual practices such as voodoo²⁹, traffickers collect a Nigerian woman’s hair, pubic hair and nail clippings, they blend it with animal products such as a chicken’s leg and pieces of plants and place them in paper wrapping, to create a “juju”, a spiritual ritual that makes women swear that they will not abandon their work obligations and that they will not reveal information about the trafficking network they have witnessed to authorities. If they break this promise they will die, become gravely ill or suffer a family catastrophe through magic powers.³⁰ In addition to the unimaginable fear that Nigerian women feel after having sworn to spirits that they will not attempt to escape, a fear often overlooked by political, legal, medical and psychiatric professionals of the western world that work with trafficking³¹, other factors

²⁶ Charles Hounmenou. "Exploring Child Prostitution in a Major City in the West African Region." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 59 (2016): 26-35. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.07.003.

²⁷ Charles Piot. "The “Right” to Be Trafficked." *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 18, no. 1 (2011): 199-210.

²⁸ Marina Mancuso. "Not All Madams Have a Central Role: Analysis of a Nigerian Sex Trafficking Network." *Trends in Organized Crime* 17, no. 1-2 (2013): 66-88. doi:10.1007/s12117-013-9199-z.

²⁹ Victoria I. Nwogu. "Nigeria: Human Trafficking and Migration." *Forced Migration Review* 25 (2006): 32-33.

³⁰ Marina Mancuso. "Not All Madams Have a Central Role: Analysis of a Nigerian Sex Trafficking Network." *Trends in Organized Crime* 17, no. 1-2 (2013): 66-88. doi:10.1007/s12117-013-9199-z.

³¹ Anthony W. Dunkerley. "Exploring the Use of Juju in Nigerian Human Trafficking Networks: Considerations for Criminal Investigators." *Police Practice and Research* 19, no. 1 (2017): 83-100. doi: 10.1080/15614263.2017.1347786.

burden them. Rape, physical abuse and threats of being sent to an uncertain origin without any money as well as a conviction that police agents are corrupt and are working with the traffickers³², destroy altogether these women's capacity to break free. Lastly, Nigerian women's beliefs that to the western world, their bodies are ideologically fastened to violence due to the African continent's tried history with colonialism³³, makes them even more unwilling to seek help from citizens of countries that perceive of them in such a derogative way.

This is the background from which some Nigerian women seen by an American or European mental health professional may have derived from. In handling such a case, a therapist faces additional challenges. The first is that Nigerian women who have been trafficked for sex work often do not disclose their traumatic experiences out of fear of the "juju". Their lack of capacity to commit to therapy along with the fragmented reports of their personal history, confronts a therapist with a number of challenges: they know the psychopathological symptoms but they do not know what has caused them. Even if a therapist's intuition leads them to suspect what has preceded, their personal exposure to safer environments may not allow for their imagination to reach tortures of a Nigerian woman. This means that the safety and security of the therapist's background may render them unable to empathize entirely with their clients. This situation is only made worse by the social and legal uncertainty of their client's future that may have them displaced and out of therapy, at a time when stability in the therapeutic relationship is crucial.³⁴

Having insecure status in a country is understandably a very different experience to having secure status for trafficking survivors in terms of psychotherapy as well, even though symptoms of a disorder may be similar.³⁵ In psychotherapy, being a trafficked sex worker is also very different from being a trafficked non-sex worker. Even though both groups may exhibit similar depressive or anxiety disorders and especially Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the severity of their symptoms along with the distress that they have endured is profoundly

³² Marcel Van Der Watt, and Beatri Kruger. "Exploring 'juju' and Human Trafficking: Towards a Demystified Perspective and Response." *South African Review of Sociology* 48, no. 2 (2017): 70-86. doi: 10.1080/21528586.2016.1222913.

³³ Anthony W. Dunkerley. "Exploring the Use of Juju in Nigerian Human Trafficking Networks: Considerations for Criminal Investigators." *Police Practice and Research* 19, no. 1 (2017): 83-100. doi: 10.1080/15614263.2017.1347786.

³⁴ Woods, Tryon P. "Surrogate Selves: Notes on Anti-trafficking and Anti-blackness." *Social Identities* 19, no. 1 (2013): 120-34. doi:10.1080/13504630.2012.753348.

³⁵ Jill Domoney, Louise M. Howard, Melanie Abas, Matthew Broadbent, and Sian Oram. "Mental Health Service Responses to Human Trafficking: A Qualitative Study of Professionals' Experiences of Providing Care." *BMC Psychiatry* 15, no. 1 (2015). doi:10.1186/s12888-015-0679-3.

distinct.³⁶ Besides the type of work that the women were engaged in, a therapist must also pay attention to the time they spent in trafficking as well as the extent of the cruelty that they have endured. A victim of extreme sexual violence can exhibit more severe symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Similarly, more time in trafficking is associated to higher levels of depression and anxiety and a longer time lapse from the cessation of their trafficking is linked to milder depressive and anxiety symptoms but to un-subsiding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms.³⁷ The question of whether these women's different needs after their escape have been met through social support should also be examined by the therapist.³⁸

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Nigerian women, brings to the forefront the concept of trauma, a form of which is sex-work trafficking on its own. To be considered a trauma, the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder claims that a lived experience should include near death experiences, grave physical harm or sexual exploitation. In the case of sex trafficking, all these criteria are often met. Not establishing a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis on its own, migration and geographical displacement is also considered traumatic by scholars, in that it robs a human from the protective shield formed by their country's cultural beliefs and traditions.³⁹ Vulnerable to developing psychological disorders in all fronts, Nigerian trafficked women challenge a therapist to understand and accept the reasons that keep them from opening up more in session.⁴⁰

Psychoanalytic, Psychodynamic and Cognitive Behavioral are some of the modalities established by and for the west in treating psychological and psychiatric distress.⁴¹ But how would the psychological trauma experienced by a Nigerian woman be treated within their own country and what are the beliefs there, in

³⁶ Stacy J. Cecchet, and John Thoburn. "The Psychological Experience of Child and Adolescent Sex Trafficking in the United States: Trauma and Resilience in Survivors." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 6, no. 5 (2014): 482-93. doi:10.1037/a0035763.

³⁷ Atsuro Tsutsumi, Takashi Izutsu, Amod K. Poudyal, Seika Kato, and Eiji Marui. "Mental Health of Female Survivors of Human Trafficking in Nepal." *Social Science & Medicine* 66, no. 8 (2008): 1841-847. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.12.025.

³⁸ Mazeda Hossain, Cathy Zimmerman, Melanie Abas, Miriam Light, and Charlotte Watts. "The Relationship of Trauma to Mental Disorders Among Trafficked and Sexually Exploited Girls and Women." *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 12 (2010): 2442-449. doi:10.2105/ajph.2009.173229.

³⁹ Melanie Abas, Nicolae V. Ostrovschi, Martin Prince, Viorel I. Gorceag, Carolina Trigub, and Siân Oram. "Risk Factors for Mental Disorders in Women Survivors of Human Trafficking: A Historical Cohort Study." *BMC Psychiatry* 13, no. 1 (2013). doi:10.1186/1471-244x-13-204.

⁴⁰ Gesine Sturm, Thierry Baubet, and Marie Rose Moro. "Culture, Trauma, and Subjectivity: The French Ethnopsychanalytic Approach." *Traumatology* 16, no. 4 (2010): 27-38. doi:10.1177/1534765610393183.

⁴¹ Becca C. Johnson. "Aftercare for Survivors of Human Trafficking." *Journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work* 39, no. 4 (2012): 370-89.

regards to human trafficking? While psychotherapy for human trafficking survivors is not established in Nigeria, close family ties are often initiated in helping a member overcome their suffering, with a male leader or a trusted healer undertaking the role of decreasing tension through spiritual or ritual based practices. In the case of sex trafficking, one cannot assume that a family would accept back a survivor of human trafficking, even more so collaborate to help them overcome distress.⁴² Even though family bonds might provide security to any other mental illness sufferer, the knowledge that this type of support might be non-existent after working as a sex slave might be even more agonizing to a woman. In reality, Nigerian tradition views mental illness as a form of possession by external deadly forces that western medicine and psychotherapy can do little about. To help them overcome, practitioners named “Babalawos” are enlisted. Babalawos plan excursions to mountains in which, along with the sufferers, they perform a series of rituals such as using holy water to send the spirits away.⁴³ The mentally ill are also considered to be people bound to die and to be reincarnated, but who are afraid to follow through with a suicide promise they have made with other Nigerian people. More specifically, some Nigerian people promise to die as a form of spiritual practice but people who are considered mentally ill are the ones who have stepped back of this promise out of fear. To heal them, palm readers agree to absolve them from the obligation to die and thus alleviate their pain.⁴⁴

In all the cases mentioned above, mental illness is perceived as a force of unknown origin that can only be dealt with through spiritual practices. Had a Nigerian woman that had survived sex trafficking returned home and exhibited symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that are observable to others, such as seeming excessively startled when surprised or not being able to sleep⁴⁵, these could be addressed through spiritual guidance. This would be the case in the event that her family would accept her back and not send her away out of shame for her work in prostitution. The ethical stance of Nigerians on human trafficking is equivocal, with the Christian church viewing it as an expression of gluttony and greed for money that can be overcome by an equitable distribution of funds among

⁴² Mazeda Hossain, Cathy Zimmerman, Melanie Abas, Miriam Light, and Charlotte Watts. "The Relationship of Trauma to Mental Disorders among Trafficked and Sexually Exploited Girls and Women." *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 12 (2010): 2442-449. doi:10.2105/ajph.2009.173229.

⁴³ O. A. Pela. "Psychotherapy: Practical Issues and Problems in Nigeria - 12 Months Experience." *The Individual and the Group*, 1982, 341-46. doi:10.1007/978-1-4684-8154-9_43.

⁴⁴ O. F. Aina. "'Psychotherapy by Environmental Manipulation' and the Observed Symbolic Rites on Prayer Mountains in Nigeria." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 9, no. 1 (2006): 1-13. doi 10.1080/13674670512331322612.

⁴⁵ P. O. Ebigdo, and U.H. Ihezue. "Belief in Reincarnation (the "ogba Nje" Phenomenon) and Its Significance for Psychotherapy in Nigeria." *Zeitschrift Fur Psycho-somatische Medizin* 27, no. 1 (1981): 84-91.

the population⁴⁶ and the Catholic denouncing abuse. The Pentecostal church also disagrees with trafficking and the Aladura sometimes promotes abuse in beating people who have been possessed by evil spirits.⁴⁷ Even though opinions are expressed theoretically, little is known about how Nigerian churches or Nigerian healers would specifically handle sex trafficking female survivors.

In this absence of concrete cross-cultural guidance, a therapist can rely on western therapeutic means to treat Nigerian women. By using diagnostic manuals, scientific research and pharmacological approaches, they can deal with the symptoms and the manifestations that these describe. The question of whether a mental health professional of the west should enter into a discussion about Nigerian traditions of witchcraft and spiritual beliefs as well as the extent to which they can negotiate such customs remains to be explored. As mental health professionals of a different cultural background, should we try to convince Nigerian women that spirits will not haunt them or should we try to work with these values and find a way out that still follows their cultural beliefs? Should we for instance emphasize the belief that they have a right to a new life as would the healers releasing sufferers from the burden to die and be reincarnated? And if we do try to influence their values, are we being ethical?⁴⁸ A level of openness and dialogue is central to building a therapeutic relationship here. If used on its own, western psychotherapy could lead to a diagnosis of delusional thinking in women who think they are controlled by spirits and would attempt to treat them for schizophrenia. But acknowledging the Nigerian cultural background of such beliefs could lead the therapist to a different diagnosis.

Unfortunately to the western therapist, the exact level of liberty and dialogue to be established in therapy between foreign spiritual values has not yet been proposed by academic literature. Within this deficiency in research however, a therapist who is working with a Nigerian former sex slave can find value in the information provided above. Since a client's perceptions of his or her life is central to therapy, a professional should focus on both perceived and existing threats to their client. While Nigerian women's fear of spiritual condemnation and torture may appear implausible to the western observer, not only is this fear magnificent to

⁴⁶ Mazeda Hossain, Cathy Zimmerman, Melanie Abas, Miriam Light, and Charlotte Watts. "The Relationship of Trauma to Mental Disorders among Trafficked and Sexually Exploited Girls and Women." *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 12 (2010): 2442-449. doi:10.2105/ajph.2009.173229.

⁴⁷ George O. Folarin. "Lk 12:13-21 in the Context of Human Corruption." *Asia Journal of Theology* 24, no. 2 (2010): 312-24.

⁴⁸ Don Akhilomen. "Addressing Child Abuse in Southern Nigeria: The Role of the Church." *Studies in World Christianity* 12, no. 3 (2006): 235-48. doi:10.3366/swc.2006.0018.

them but it is also combined with the real threat that sex trafficking victims face by traffickers who are looking to get them back.⁴⁹

Much like treating a patient who is constantly afraid for their life due to a terminal illness, therapists treat Nigerian women who perceive the threat of death as imminent. In this capacity, a therapist has the dual role, both to provide a safe space that nurtures security to these women and to fight against their own feeling of uncertainty that may arise due to legal, political and security issues that are pending for an extended timeframe. Aggravated by a feeling of being rejected from otherwise closely-bonded families and of finding themselves among foreign, suspicious populations, these women face rejection both from their past and from their future.⁵⁰

Treating a sex trafficking female survivor is one of the most challenging, yet inspiring tasks a western therapist can undertake. Even though research on how to help a Nigerian woman with such experiences, while respecting her cultural backgrounds is limited and inconclusive, persevering on this goal is an achievement on its own. Trying to establish a successful cross-cultural therapeutic alliance despite the challenges, not only could help sex trade survivors but also depicts the potential of psychology to counteract man-made challenges.⁵¹

⁴⁹ P. O. Ebigdo, and U.H. Ihezue. "Belief in Reincarnation (the "ogba Nje" Phenomenon) and Its Significance for Psychotherapy in Nigeria." *Zeitschrift Fur Psycho-somatische Medizin* 27, no. 1 (1981): 84-91.

⁵⁰ Nlierum S. Okogbule. "Combating the "New Slavery" in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Legal and Policy Responses to Human Trafficking." *Journal of African Law* 57, no. 1 (2013): 57-80.

⁵¹ Victoria I. Nwogu. "Nigeria: Human Trafficking and Migration." *Forced Migration Review* 25 (2006): 32-33.