

The Effectiveness of Postmodern Feminist Empowering Counseling for Abused Women: A Perspectives of Thai Abused Women

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This qualitative research aimed to explore the perspectives of Thai abused women regarding the effectiveness of postmodern feminist empowering counseling (PFEC) for them. The research and data collection was done in nine months. The setting of the study was a tertiary hospital located in the lower Northern area in Thailand. The participants were six abused women. The research instruments consisted of semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that the abused women, who received counseling, achieved changes in three aspects; (a) men and women are equal, (b) being abused is not fate, and (c) feeling powerful. These findings suggested that the PFEC process proposed can be utilized by counselors to increase perceived empowerment in abused women. Positive adjustments to their lives can be explained by their perceived empowerment and developed through the counseling process.

Keywords: abused women, postmodern feminist counseling, PFEC, empowerment

Violence against women is danger facing women in every corner of the world. It can happen to women of any age, as a fetus, toddler, girl child, teenager, adult, and elderly. (Kritaya, Kanchanachitra, Im-em, & Lerdsrisuntad, 2005). According to the report of office of women's affairs and family development (2012), the incidence of violence related to children, women, and domestic violence markedly increased in Thailand, with a total of 916 occurrences of violence reported. The violence was perpetrated by men (86.23%) more than by women (11.50%); in about 2.27% of cases, the gender of the perpetrator was not identified. Considerably more women were abused within the family (87.18%) compared to men (10.28%); the gender of the abused was not identified in around 2.54% cases. Physical and psychological violence (in some instances) was carried out repetitively, and sexual violence represented 61.29%, 27.54%, 6.22% and 4.95% of the cases, respectively.

The impact of violence on women's physical, psychological, and sexual well-being has not been systematically assessed (Leslie, 2001). However, some empirical studies revealed that the consequences of violence can lead to depression, psychological breakdown, or serious injuries. More importantly, in extreme cases, it can even lead to murder or suicide (Henttonen, Watts, Roberts, Kaducu & Borchert, 2008). A previous study by Smith, Tessaro, and Earp (1995) reported that women who were abused might develop fear and powerless. Consequently, the abused women were hesitate to receive health services due to shame, lack of self-respect, and decreased self-appreciation. Based on previous study, it has been found that the feelings of raped women were powerlessness, loneliness, and inner conflicts about power issue, being controlled, and inner questioning about the meaning of how sex with their partners should be (Finkelhor & Yoll, 1983, as cited in Howard, Riger, Campbell, & Wasco, 2003).

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One of the major problems among physically and sexually abused women is the feeling to control or live. For example, they do not know how to handle their own emotions, how to use social support, and how to avoid the feeling of guilt and shame (Howard et al., 2003). In Thai context, a previous study by Boonmongkon et al. (2003) reported that the violence against women was considered as an individual problem; it was not a social problem as in Thai culture; Thais perceived that men are the dominant persons. Therefore, it's not surprising that women are victims of men in case of physical, psychological or sexual abused aspects. Moreover, these violent cases are usually considered as minor problem. Therefore, in order to help the abused women, the empowering process is importantly needed (Dutton-Douglas & Walker, 1988; Howard et al., 2003).

According to Stein (1997), the empowerment can be classified into three aspects. The first aspect focuses on raising consciousness through dialogue. The second aspect focuses on empowering the awareness of self confidence in order to acknowledge the value of their own power so that they can make decision and control their own lives. The last aspects are the combination of consciousness raising and the empowering the awareness. This combination can help the critical awareness which is able to empower the individual behavior development to be ready for any critical situations (Gibson, 1991; Fulton, 1997; Stein, 1997).

The postmodern feminist empowering process (PFEC) aims to implement changes of women within men dominant society. This empowering process would help women choose and control their own living paths by raising the equal gender awareness between men and women. Thus, women are able to develop the empowering process through the critical awareness (Stein, 1997; Austad, 2009; Corey, 2009). In this study, the researcher focused on the feminist empowering process because it is necessary to assist abused women to recognize their own ability, which in turn can control their own lives.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness-based treatment have been used in previous studies, regarding an intervention for counseling abused women (Bryant, 2000; Kubany, Hill, & Owens, 2003; Taft, Bryant-Davis, Woodward, Tillman, & Torres, 2009). The roles of consultant are instructing counselees to set their goals and teaching them some techniques to change their thoughts and behaviors (Dutton-Douglas & Walker, 1988; Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). Previous studies reported that this counseling process has been able to help abused women in improving their conditions, enabling them to overcome suicide risk and suicidal thoughts, achieving better social behavior adjustment, and dealing with depression (Kubany et al., 2003; Taft et al., 2009). In general counseling process, it is conducted by a counselor who has to advise and respond to the counselee's problems with care. The counselor will help and support counselees to solve their problems by providing the opportunity for them to choose their own ways (Scissons, 1993). Although general counseling process, based on the counseling theories can solve the problems of the clients in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, it is still insufficient to resolve problems for abused women because the women were repeated to abuse. Moreover, the problems of those who are abused are related to many factors such as power, social structure, oppression in social structure, the roles of woman and man relations, and identity.

Violence against women have root in gender power relations and shaped by inequality between the genders. In other words, violence against women is gender – based violence because women are subjected to the violence (Leslie, 2001; Kritaya et al., 2005). Therefore, development process of empowering counseling, based on the theory of postmodern feminist, is needed because general counseling theories are ineffective to understand the roots of their

problems (Corey, 2009). The major goal of postmodern feminist counseling is empowerment, which it hopes to achieve by focusing on external structures and attempting to free clients from a “blaming the victim” stance. However, although the focus is on external structures, the importance of monitoring intra-psychic factors is also emphasized (Leslie, 2001; Corey, 2009).

A few studies were conducted research to evaluate the effectiveness of the PFEC (Chandler, Worell, & Johnson, 2000; Israeli & Santor, 2000; Moradi, Fischer, Hill, Jome, & Blum, 2000). However, those studies used the quantitative method, focused on topics, such as measuring self-esteem, quality of life, gender-role flexibility, social networks, perception of oppression, and social structure. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of Thai abused women on the effectiveness of the PFEC.

This study was one part of our parent study. In the parent study, there were two phases to develop the postmodern feminist empowering process (PFEC). For the first phase, abused women were interviewed related to understand their abused experiences. Then, in the second phase, data were utilized by the first phase to develop the PFEC for these women. For this paper, we will focus on evaluation of the PFEC on the views of Thai abused women. Research question was *“How did Thai abused women perceive the effectiveness of the PFEC?”*

Methods

Design

The qualitative research method designed by Morse and Field (1996) was used in this study. Six abused women participated in this study. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit the participants. Inclusion criteria were; (a) older than 18 years old, (b) be able to speak Thai language, (c) experience physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and first-time visitors to the One Stop Crisis Center (OSCC) or had been referred from other hospitals. The study was conducted in one tertiary hospital, located in the northern part of Thailand. The hospital provided services for seasoned patients and offered remedial specialist help for patients transferred from a network of health care services. The OSCC served abused women who were in a critical crisis due to violence.

Data Collection and Analysis

The duration of the research was from February 1 to October 31, 2011. The in-depth interview, which lasted 60-90 minutes, was used to collect data. Content analysis was also used to evaluate the counseling process after its completion.

Rigors of qualitative research: The trustworthiness of the qualitative component of the study was established using four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morse & Field, 1996). Credibility was established by prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Transferability was established by clearly describing a database with sufficient information and detailed descriptions for the reader to understand that the actions used could be applied in similar settings. Dependability was established by providing enough information to enable future researchers to replicate the work. Confirmability was established by analyzing the data and checking their accuracy against the study participants.

Ethical Considerations

The Institutional Review Board of the primary investigator's academic institution and of the hospital used as the study site approved the conduct of the study. All potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the scope of their participation in the study, confidentiality and anonymity issues, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. All the women who agreed to take part in the study were asked to sign a consent form.

Findings

Demographic characteristics

The age of participants ranged from 35-51 years. Of the six women, five women were married and the other was divorced. The educational backgrounds of the participants were as follows: two high school certificates, four primary school certificates. Four of them were physical abused, and two were physical and psychological abused. There was no sexual abused woman in this phrase.

Qualitative findings

The findings showed that the abused women who received counseling achieved changes in three themes. The findings were as follows:

Thought changes: men and women are equal. Participants showed that their lives were improved. They thought that they had the same rights as their husbands because they were both human and that their husbands were not the owners of their lives. For example, one abused woman said: *"I want to change him so that he can know that men and women are the same. He is not the owner of my life. However, I myself have to start changing first, not to be his disadvantage. I think I have the same rights as him. I am also a human."* (P4)

Additionally, one participant thought that she could take care of herself and life is free. As she said, *"I think that I can manage by myself and not being in anyone's control. It does not need to bear abuse by her husband for the sake of being a good mother."* (P5)

Belief changes: being abused is not fate. Participants showed that their lives were improved because they had changed their beliefs about abuse being fate. They felt independent and gained self-confidence. For example, one abused woman said: *"It is not about fate. I can choose to respond... (ha ha ha). I think I can choose. No one can force me. I am not under any power. I can do myself."* (P2)

Similarly, one participant believes that abuse is not fate or destiny. As she said, *"I believe that abuse is not fate and life seems renewed. I can take care of myself."* (P1)

Emotional changes: feeling powerful. Participants showed that their lives were improved because they had better feelings. They were more relieved, had encouragement and suffered less. For example, one abused woman said: *"The indicators of my better life are deeply feeling that I am happier. It is inner. I am relieved. It starts in my mind. It is powerful. The encouragement helps me to be better. My behavior is also changed so much. I am calmer. I learn to avoid and have consciousness."* (P5)

Similarly, one participant showed that the signal indicating that her life is better was that better feeling, relieved feeling, less suffering. For example, one abused woman said: *“The signal showing that my life is better is my better feeling and less suffering. I can restraint my mind. I feel relieved.”* (P6)

Discussion

The PFEC helped these abused women change their beliefs and their perception of their internal power changed considerably from evaluation of the PFEC on the views of Thai abused women.

This finding is consistent with a study by Sharma (2001) that reported that the PFEC is helpful in term of healing psychological wounds of abused women. Moreover, positive effects of PFEC including, concerning self-esteem, courage, social adjustment, and social support in both individuals and groups are also reported (Johannson & Tutty, 1998; Rinfret-Raynor, & Cantin, 1997, as cited in Sharma, 2001). In this finding, the PFEC enabled the abused women to change their thoughts and gain a feeling of empowerment because the counselor focused on building an egalitarian relationship with the participant from their first meeting until the end of the process. This relationship; a very different one from that used in general counseling, was based on mutual self-disclosure and a sharing of skills, experiences, thoughts, and beliefs to discover the participant’s inner power. This encouraged the participant to make choices and decisions about their life in which they were the expert. The counselor then used some basic counseling techniques and more specific “empowering” techniques: therapy-demystifying strategies, power analysis, social analysis, and gender-role analysis.

The techniques used in feminist counseling differ from techniques used in general counseling and include; (a) therapy-demystifying strategies are focused on self-disclosing, making decisions, skill sharing between the counselor and the participant to bring about an egalitarian relationship, (b) sex-role analysis is used to understand the impact of social expectations about sex roles. This method can help the participant to clarify changes in her understanding about gender-roles, (c) social analysis is used when the participant feels that she is discriminated against socially and she begins to be hesitant, and (d) power analysis is helpful for women to analyze why power is different between women and men in society, and what conditions oppress or lead the men to have more power than the participant so that she feels powerless.

The belief change in the participant is attributed to the consciousness-raising process that helped them find their inner power; having tried to understand and perceive the meaning of being abused from the experience of the participant, the counselor understands what factors lead the participant to submit to abuse. Thus, the counselor could evaluate what the participant was facing. In addition, the counseling process is flexible. For example, when the participant’s oppression is evaluated, they can choose what issue to talk first. Moreover, the process will be different experiences; based on they want individual. This counseling process should be used to help abused women transform from feeling totally powerless to be empowered. In doing so, the counselor should be able to identify gender perspectives and the postmodern feminist viewpoint.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The process of PFEC was developed and evaluated, based on the opinions of abused women who had received the counseling. The PFEC process can help participating women to reconstruct their oppressive beliefs about being abused. Although this counseling process was helped by the experiences of the various abused women, in practice setting, the counselor still needs to individually adapt the process within the context of each abused woman. Moreover, It is necessary that the counselor should be able to bring about the necessary changes to the counselee. At least, the counselor should have the following competencies including having experience in basic counseling, understanding of gender perspectives, and identifying the postmodern feminist viewpoint. This means paradigm shift in beliefs and perceptions about abused women is needed.

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