Public Abstract

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Title:'Waiting for the Cold to End': A Qualitative Exploration of PhotoVoice as a Therapeutic Intervention with Survivors of Sexual Assault

Sexual assault has reached epidemic proportions, and disproportionately affects college-aged women. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the most commonly associated mental health disorder associated with sexual assault. There are many scientifically proven successful interventions for treating PTSD among survivors; however, these interventions fail to address posttraumatic growth as a form of recovery. Research states that without posttraumatic growth, symptoms associated with PTSD will continue to surface. This study explored PhotoVoice – a participatory action research method – as a brief therapeutic intervention for survivors of sexual assault. The purpose of this research was to examine how PhotoVoice allowed survivors to grow post-trauma as they reconstructed their identities through a process of cognitive restructuring, exposure, and narrative group work. Nine women participated in PhotoVoice, and each woman was given a camera to photograph images that represented her sexual assault, or healing experiences. They met together three times to discuss their photos. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to guide the discussion. Each group held an exhibit where they displayed their photos and invited attendees. Qualitative results showed that participants were able to confront their triggers through a process of exposure, as well as address their negative distortions through cognitive reframing and meaning-making. The exhibits allowed participants to reclaim control over their self-narratives, as well as educate stakeholders about the traumatic impacts of sexual assault at a Midwestern university. Quantitative results revealed a decrease in symptoms of PTSD, as well as an increase in posttraumatic growth and positive rape attributions.