



# TRAUMA INFORMED PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

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# PROCESSES OF DESISTANCE



Developing positive relationships



Identity transformation



Exercising agency

# MISHA'S STORY



- Childhood physical, sexual, and emotional abuse
- Bereavement
- Rape
- Sexual exploitation
- Mental illness
- Addiction
- Repeated imprisonment
- Domestic abuse
- Loss of children



# TRAUMA AND RELATIONSHIPS

- Damaged attachments (Ansbro, 2008, 2019; Bowlby, 1972)
- Mistrust, emotional uncertainty, withdrawal and isolation (Courtois, 2004; Herman, 2015; Craissati, Joseph & Skett, 2015)
- Vulnerability and revictimisation (Herman, 2015; Trickett, Noll & Putman, 2011)



PERSISTENT MISTRUST,  
EMOTIONAL UNCERTAINTY,  
WITHDRAWAL AND  
ISOLATION

**Persistent mistrust**

"...it takes me quite a lot to trust people, because I really have big trust issues as well, you know. Yeah, I have big trust issues" (Lynne, follow up 1)

**Emotional uncertainty**

"It's like a baby when he comes into the world and they look around, like, confused and that, that's, kind of, how I think I felt. It's like I had this emotion but it was like it would hurt, every emotion would hurt, or whatever I was feeling I would hurt because I didn't know actually what it was. And then so I'll try and block it out and just think, you know, and I don't feel nothing. That was the kind of thing that I lived by" (Charlene, initial interview)

**Withdrawal and isolation**

"I don't think everyone needs a family at the end of the day, I ain't for a family, me and my mum have got the most broken relationship you've ever seen, my dad died, my brother died, I don't need a family ... if I rely on myself ain't no-one going to let me down (Ruby, initial interview).

## RELATIONAL VULNERABILITY AND REVICTIMISATION

**Vulnerability – *the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally* (OED)**

“My life has been everyone keeps being violent to me, maybe I’m an easy target. Every relationship, even if it’s a friendship, every relationship I’ve had with people there’s always been violence” (Tasha, initial interview).

“...if you talk to a lot of women in here, most of us are in here because of men, partners or exes, so men in our lives. My whole dorm, all of us is because of men. You will find another dorm is the same thing, a lot of us, the guy did this” (Kim, initial interview).

“it's like he still wants to be with me, but... I think at the moment I need to work more on myself before I even try to be in a relationship with anyone. I need to focus on what I need in my life” (Michaela, follow up 1).

# TRAUMA AND IDENTITY

- Prolonged abuse involves methods of domination that are deliberately intended to destroy the person's sense of self.
- Traumatic events, by definition, are those that cannot be assimilated into the survivor's self-narrative (van der Kolk, 2014).
- Dissociative experiences enable trauma survivors to adapt to abusive environments, but can have damaging affects on the individual's sense of self (Herman, 2015)
- Reframing a 'checkered past' (Maruna, 2001: 39) into a new pro-social identity is a significantly different task to making sense of experiences of prolonged, repeated abuse to which the survivor is unable to ascribe meaning.



“I think everything is just twice as bad now. I just feel ugly, I feel worthless...I feel like if people really knew me, like they would know that I am an ugly person” (Edina, initial interview)

“I never thought about myself in terms of me being a woman. I really haven't. You know, what is a woman? Who am I? I'm still working it out” (Lynne, initial interview).

“I'm just totally lost. When I first came out I was, like, yes, I know what I want, I know where I'm going...And, I've just, kind of, fallen back into trying to please everyone else, and not being myself again, my priorities are all wrong...my sense of self has gone again, Holloway makes you be yourself, you come out and you think, what the fuck happened there!” (Catherine, follow up 1)



# TRAUMA, AGENCY, AND RESPONSIBILITY

- For criminalised women, agency is either over-emphasised or denied... 'fragments of social debris floundering in a theoretical tide of victimage' (Maher, 1977: 1)
- Prolonged trauma only occurs in situations where the person is held captive, unable to escape and therefore stripped of agency (Herman, 2015)
- Impacts of trauma and victimisation interact with social and cultural discourses that assign blame to women not just for what they have done, but for what has been done to them



“I put my mind to it. It’s down to you. It’s got to be the individual. If you don’t want to stop you’re not going to stop... because at the first place when I got involved in drugs, it was me what put myself on it, so the way I look at it is, if I put myself on it, I can get myself out of it, and that’s how I deal with it...and it’s a lot to do with your mentality as well, how strong you are, and willpower, I’m very strong, if I put my mind to it, I can do whatever I want to do, yes?” (Miriam, initial interview)

## SUPPORTING WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

“Creative practice needs to be about more than navigating the way over, under, around or through obstacles – sometimes it needs to be about confronting them and removing them”(Weaver and McNeill, 2010: 56)

Principles of trauma-informed practice: safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment, trust (Harris and Fallot, 2001)

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