

## Conference

The Association for Women in Psychology

Expanding the Boundaries of Feminist Psychology: Social Justice, Activism, Resistance

March 14, 2008

## Presenter

Melinda Paige, LMHC, NCC

## Title

Empowering women toward recovery: The use of language and metaphor with women who have experienced sexual assault.

In 2005, there were 191,670 victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault in the United States according to the 2005 National Crime Victimization Survey. It is also important to note that sexual violence is one of the most underreported crimes. “Less than one rape in ten is reported to police. Only 1 percent of rapes are ultimately resolved by arrest and conviction of the offender. Thus, the most common trauma of women remains confined to the sphere of private life, without formal recognition or restitution from the community. There is no public monument for rape survivors” (Herman, 1997, p. 73).

## A Review of the Literature

The rape experience is a transformative one in the life of a woman. There is a growing body of literature highlighting the emotional growth and increased self-efficacy experienced by women as a result of their recovery from rape trauma. In her study of long-term survivors of rape, Thompson (2000) calls for more “linguistic resources” and “alternative discourse

promoting positive outcomes of rape.” She further states that “more research on positive outcomes may also enable women and professionals to discuss positive outcomes without fear of being viewed as supportive of rape itself” (p. 341-342).

“Among the positive changes reported in the literature are improved relationships, development of new possibilities, a greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength, and spiritual development (Linley et al., 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun 1995). Although positive sequelae are not often examined in studies of trauma, several studies have documented some form of growth or positive change in 50% or more of trauma survivors (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), including sexual assault survivors (Burt & Katz, 1987; Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001; Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger & Long, 2004; Thompson, 2000)” (Borja, Callahan, & Long, 2006).

In addition to emphasizing the positive life changes reported by individuals who have experienced sexual trauma, the literature also indicates that these individuals report these positive life changes within weeks of the traumatic event. “Early descriptive work was very important in raising awareness among researchers and clinicians that survivors may experience positive as well as negative life changes in the aftermath of a traumatic event. More recent work has contributed to our understanding of the *process* of positive change and has challenged some common assumptions in the literature. For example, contrary to the assumption that it takes months or years for survivors to report positive changes (e.g., Schaefer & Moos, 1998), many survivors do so as soon as a week or two after traumatic events (Affleck, Tennen, & Gershman, 1985; Thompson, 1985), including sexual assault (Frazier & Burnett, 1994; Frazier et al., 2001). In addition, early reports of positive life change, rather than reflecting denial (Cohen, Hettler, & Pane, 1998), appear to be associated with better long-term recovery (Affleck, Tennen, Croog, &

Levine, 1987; McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997; Thompson, 1985)” (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger & Long, 2004, p. 19).

### A Relational-Cultural Approach to Trauma Resolution

Feminist psychotherapists create language and meaning that fit with the relational experience of women and celebrate their strength and resilience. Likewise, this paper positions the use of Connelly’s Rapid Resolution Therapy (2004) within a relational-cultural therapeutic dyad. “Healing possibilities emerge through acts of co-creation, where processes of mutual empowerment continually unfold. In these therapy dyads, the client and the therapist move toward expanded relational capacity” (Walker and Rosen, 2004, p.34). When we celebrate the victories of the many women who have survived sexual assault in addition to mourning their losses, we broaden our feminist perspectives of women’s potential for growth and transformation.

The resolution of trauma requires reconnection with the relational self and with the world. Once again, my relational-cultural view that disconnection is the source of human suffering also resonates with my conceptualization of treatment approaches to trauma resolution with women who have experienced sexual assault. The reconnection stage of recovery in trauma treatment is also relationally framed by Judith Herman in her book, Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence-from domestic violence to political terror. Herman’s describes her view of the final stage of trauma resolution as predicated on the creation of new meanings for relationship to self, other, and the world.

“Now she must develop a new self. Her relationships have been tested and forever changed by the trauma; now she must develop new relationships. The old beliefs that gave

meaning to her life have been challenged by the trauma; now she must find anew a sustaining faith. These are the tasks of the third stage of recovery. In accomplishing this work, the survivor reclaims her world” (Herman, 1997, p.196).

In addition, Herman also states that during this final phase of her recovery from trauma the individual can also “identify positive aspects of the self that were forged in the traumatic experience, even while recognizing that any gain was achieved at far too great a price” (Herman, 1997, p. 204). Herman focuses on the transformative aspects of the trauma that have enriched the life of the individual without minimizing the painful aspects of the traumatic experience. Herman illustrates the gift of trauma that is often overlooked when we assist individuals in reconstructing meaning in the reconnection stage of recovery.

“The survivor who has accomplished her recovery faces life with few illusions but often with gratitude. Her view of life may be tragic, but for that very reason she has learned to cherish laughter. She has a clear sense of what is important and what is not. Having encountered evil, she knows how to cling to what is good. Having encountered the fear of death, she knows how to celebrate life” (Herman, 1997, 213).

#### Connelly’s Approach to Trauma Resolution: Connection and Language

This purpose of this paper is to present examples of interventions utilizing Connelly’s Rapid Resolution Therapy (2004) to resolve trauma. This approach demonstrates the use of language that empowers women toward recovery without minimizing their unique sexual assault experiences. This paper will demonstrate the ways in which language and metaphors along with enhanced connection can contribute to positive outcomes in therapy with women who have experienced sexual assault.

One example of the way language can be disempowering is when it suggests that a woman who has experienced sexual assault has somehow been essentially and indefinitely changed for the worst by the assault(s). Therapists commonly address this in therapy by working toward modifying this individual's perceived sense of self as damaged by the assault(s). Connelly's Rapid Resolution Therapy utilizes language which illustrates that the woman is not "her body" and that the assault(s) did not "happen to" her essential self or personhood, thereby, separating her perceived identity in the present moment from the sexual assault that occurred in the past. His approach puts the "participant" in the driver's seat by helping her change the negative or hurtful meaning her mind had assigned to the event to a much more useful and positive meaning.

Connelly would suggest that the participant "try on" a different perspective of the sexual assault and then provide a metaphor that would help her reconstruct meaning assigned to the event. For example, he would ask the participant to reflect on what people recall about a person that has passed away. He would ask if people are likely to remark about what that person's arm or leg looked like. Then, he would ask if people are more likely to remember "the essence" the person, the part of who we are that cannot be touched. Finally, he would state "the perpetrator never touched you, your essence, that part of you that can never be touched."

A second metaphor that helps the participant to replace shame with a sense of pride involves the prisoner of war automobile license plates often displayed by war veterans. Connelly asks the participant if she has ever seen these license plates and if she knows why veterans who have been prisoners of war so proudly display them. He then asks why women who survive a similar experience do not display a similar automobile license plate that says "Survivor of Sexual

Assault.” He asks the participant if she can think of a reason why a woman who survived an equally horrific experience should not proudly display her accomplishment for all to appreciate.

A third metaphor Connelly utilizes demonstrates the gift of trauma. He tells the following story: Two women walk through the desert. The first woman has plenty of water with her to drink along her long journey. She arrives at the end of this journey and discovers a beautiful fountain overflowing with water and with bottles of cold drinking water lining its edge. The second woman has no water with her drink along her journey. Her mouth is so dry as she walks that she cannot produce enough moisture to spit the sand from her mouth. She arrives at the same beautiful fountain overflowing with water and with bottles of cold drinking water lining its edge. Connelly asks the participant what each woman is thinking and feeling as she sees the fountain at the end of her journey. He states that the second woman can appreciate the fountain in ways that the first woman cannot because of the intense suffering she experienced on her journey.

Connelly’s approach echoes that of feminist psychotherapists who likewise focus on connected therapeutic relationships within which language and meaning celebrating the strength and resiliency of women can be co-created. Additionally, Connelly’s approach resonates with van der Kolk’s views discussed in his chapter entitled *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and The Nature of Trauma* in the book Healing Trauma by Solomon and Siegel. In his chapter on the nature of trauma van der Kolk states that “to make meaning of the traumatic experience is usually not enough. Traumatized individuals need to have experiences that directly contradict the emotional helplessness and physical paralysis that accompany traumatic experiences” (Solomon and Siegel, 2003, p. 188).

Connelly asserts that only through connected and credible therapeutic dyads can meaning be co-created that both empowers and elevates. Further, Connelly emphasizes that traumatized individuals need to have new experiences in session and that therapists can create these sensory specific experiences through enhanced connection throughout the therapeutic process.

“Connection is a magnet the psychotherapist can use to affect the participant’s energy level, mood, and outlook. In order to build connection, the psychotherapist should demonstrate her interest in understanding the participant’s experience. In addition, she should clarify and demonstrate this understanding while being positive, interesting, appreciative, and incorporating appropriate humor” (Connelly, 2004, p. 22). Finally, Connelly suggests that the psychotherapist “provide the experience of connection while staying in the light” (Connelly, 2004, p. 23). His use of metaphor allows him to create a new experience in the moment for the participant without minimizing her experience of the traumatic event.

Connelly’s use of sensory-specific language and metaphor create what Fosha refers to as a “core affective experience” which involves the corresponding areas of the brain found to be essential for resolving trauma. Fosha suggests that “the full visceral experience of a specific core affective phenomenon constitutes the first state of transformation. When interventions aimed at counteracting defenses, anxiety, helplessness, and shame are effective, core affective experience is assessed. The state in which the individual experiences core affect is experientially and psychodynamically discontinuous with the defense-dominated state that precedes it: Characteristic processing is right-brain mediated, that is, it is largely sensori-motor, image-dominated, visceral, nonlinear” (Solomon and Siegel, 2003, p. 233).

### Implications for Future Research and Practice

Recent literature also recognizes that helping an individual who has experienced trauma focus on that which she can control in the present moment, such as the meaning she attributes to the traumatic event, contributes to more positive outcomes. “Although control has long been implicated in the trauma recovery process, past theories (e.g., Foa, Zinbarg, & Rothbaum, 1992) have focused on control over the event itself (past control). Frazier et al.’s (2002) review of the trauma literature suggested that present control—one form of which is control over the recovery process—is the one type of control consistently associated with lower distress levels, perhaps because the present is in fact more controllable than the past or the future. This form of control deserves more attention in theories of both positive life change and distress. In addition, clinicians working with survivors struggling to regain a sense of control might help them to identify what they can control in the present” (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger & Long, 2004, p. 28).

### References

- Borja, S.E., Callahan, J.L., & Long, P.J. (2006). Positive and negative adjustment and social support of sexual assault survivors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 19(6), 905-914.
- Connelly, J. (2004). *Life changing conversations: The power of transformational communication*. Jupiter: Institute for Survivors of Sexual Violence, Inc.
- Frazier, P., Tashiro, T., Berman, M., Steger, M., & Long, J. (2004). Correlates of levels and patterns of positive life changes following sexual assault. *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology*, 72(1), 19-30.
- Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic violence to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.
- Solomon, M. F., Siegel, D.J. (2003). *Healing Trauma: Attachment, mind, body, and brain*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Thompson, M. (2000). Life after rape: a chance to speak? *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 15(4), 341-342.
- Walker, M., Rosen, W. B. (2004). *How connections heal: Stories from relational-cultural therapy*. New York: The Guilford Press.