THESIS ABSTRACT

Title: PAGKATAO, PAGKABABAE, AT SEKSWALIDAD (SELF-CONCEPT, WOMANHOOD, AND SEXUALITY): A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE INNER WORLD OF THE GIRL-CHILD PROSTITUTE

Researcher: Priscilla C. Gonzalez No. of Pages: 239
Adviser: Ma. Lourdes A. Carandang, PhD Year: 1995
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Statement of the Problem:

This study aims to look into the “inner world” of the child prostitute and explore how her self-concept, womanhood, relationships with the opposite sex, and developing sexuality have been affected by her experience of prostitution. It also examines how these four aspects of the child prostitute’s inner world interact. These four aspects and specific questions on them are:

1. Self-concept. What is the child prostitute’s concept of herself? How does she perceive her worth? How does she perceive her efficacy, that is, her ability to cope and to have some control over her circumstances? What are her coping strategies? What are her dreams for herself?

2. Womanhood. How does the child prostitute feel about being a woman? How does she see the place of women in society, in the family, in relation to men? What is her concept of women—her characteristics, their strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities?

3. Relationships. What is the quality of her relationships with males? What are the underlying feelings and dynamics that govern these relationships? What is her concept of love, affection, and attraction?

4. Sexuality. How does the child prostitute experience the sexual act? What is the role of sex in her present life? How does she experience, perceive, and accept her sexuality?

Procedure:

Because of this study’s focus on the child prostitute’s inner life, an in-depth, clinical case study approach was used to explore the “inner world” of eight girls, aged 14 to 17 years, with previous involvement in prostitution. This method was chosen to encourage the expression of their deepest and most personal feelings, needs, issues, and attitudes. Using a combination of the clinical interview and projective techniques, both the child’s conscious and unconscious dynamics were brought to the fore.
Treatment of Data:

The girls’ responses to the clinical interview and projective techniques, as well as unintended expressions of their concepts, issues and feelings, were transcribed, and then organized according to the categories of the research questions. The data were, then, read through per category and qualitatively studied for common trends among respondents and/or any patterns that seemed to emerge among the 8 children in answer to the research questions. Results on each of the four aspects were integrated and analyzed and also related to Finkelhor and Browne’s “Traumagenic Dynamics” when relevant. The relationships between the four aspects were also examined, as will be seen later in the data presentation.

Findings:

The main finding was that a process of dissociation had taken place, resulting in an emotional/conceptual “split”. The girls’ self-concept, sense of womanhood, and sexuality contained two widely disparate, and yet equally present, self-images: the one that had been irreparably damaged and degraded by the experiences of abuse and prostitution and, therefore, deserved no honor, love, or happiness, and the one that held hope for a “new (or fantasized) me” that was respected and loved, and had a real chance for happiness.

Conclusion:

A series of traumatic life events, ending with involvement in prostitution, has caused a process of dissociation (“splitting”) in the girls. These significant, traumatic life events are:

1. **Loss of a parent’s love**;
2. **Subsequent neglect, abandonment, and abuse**, which caused the first split: (a) the self who has been hurt, damaged, and broken, and rendered worthless and powerless; and (b) the self that still struggles to live on, that strives to find, in its environment, “scraps” to live on: boyfriends to replace parents, friends for companionship and warmth, drugs, alcohol, and petty crime to escape pain and to survive;
3. **And finally, prostitution**, which delivers the final blow to the self: The already weakened, broken, alone, abandoned, and powerless orphan, in her attempt to stay alive and survive, stumbles into a way of life that further deepens the wound of hurt with even colder cruelty, exploitation, and condemnation. The hurt deepens, the shame deepens; the self sinks, from worthlessness, deeper into filth, cheapness, and disgusting loathsomeness.

And yet, in the midst of this despair, is the small voice of hope that reaches out to a longed-for future; that takes pride and faith in the new-found power to change oneself and the new-found opportunity to “reach for the star” of love, happiness, self-respect and dignity.
Recommendations:

This unique dynamics of the girls presents several implications for therapy and healing:

1. *Trauma at the core.* Because the pain and trauma of prostitution is so deep and the children seem so frightened of facing it, much more releasing it, great care should be taken in considering therapeutic interventions.

   The children need to be given the venue, the safety, and the opportunity to explore, recall, express, and work through their traumatic experience and its concomitant emotions, *when they are ready.* They should not be pushed to open up too early. Openness needs to be fostered and supported, while at the same time, *the individual is prepared by building emotional resources and ego strength.*

2. *Stigma that haunts them.* Much therapy work needs to be done to help the children find reasons to heal their deeply-held feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and shame, and to restore their very fragile and all-but-diminished sense of self-worth. It is also imperative that rehabilitation staff be extra careful when speaking of prostitution and sex, so that they do not unintentionally condemn what a child has been through, what she is feeling, and who she is.

3. *Profound loss of parental love.* Because of the loss of parental love which the girls still feel intensely up to the present, there is a need to build up effective, loving, and consistent support systems for the child that will provide the “family feeling” that she longs for and needs.

4. *A Group to share with.* Because the girls are highly reluctant to share feelings with adults, group therapy among “kindred souls” might be helpful.

5. *Reaching out to the hopeless.* Because of their extreme passivity, these children are not likely to approach agencies for help. It is up to the agencies to find better ways of reaching out to them, letting them know that help is available, providing a firm guiding hand, if needed should they decide to make the shift.