

Meeting of Spirits: Strengths and Challenges of Therapy Practice in Cambodia

Stephanie E. Armes, Lorien S. Jordan, Desiree M. Seponski,
Monysakada Phal, Amanda C. Peclat-Begin



Overview

- Situating therapy practice within the context of Cambodia
- Methodology
- Findings: *Toward a theory of Cambodian therapists' experiences in working with trauma*
- Discussion

Context of Cambodia

- Genocide during Khmer Rouge (KR) Regime, 1975-1979 (Schunert et al., 2012)
- Ensuing civil war, continued KR occupation (some areas) until 1998 (Jarl, 2015)
- Lack of justice for victims of the KR regime (Bockers, Stammel, Knasevelsrud, 2011)
- Continued violence, domestic violence (Eng, Szmodis, & Grace, 2017; Hueveline & Poch, 2006)

Therapy practice in Cambodia

- Limited mental health resources after civil war, not restored until 1995 (Somasundaram et al., 1999)
- 2 psychiatrists remained after genocide (Stewart, 2010; Stockwell et al., 2005)
- Impact on mental health infrastructure (Stockwell et al., 2005)
 - Lack of training programs & therapists
- Training provided by NGOs (e.g., EMDR, CBT)
- First Master's program: Royal University of Phnom Penh (2010)

Guiding Research Question

*What are the experiences of
Cambodian therapists working
with trauma?*

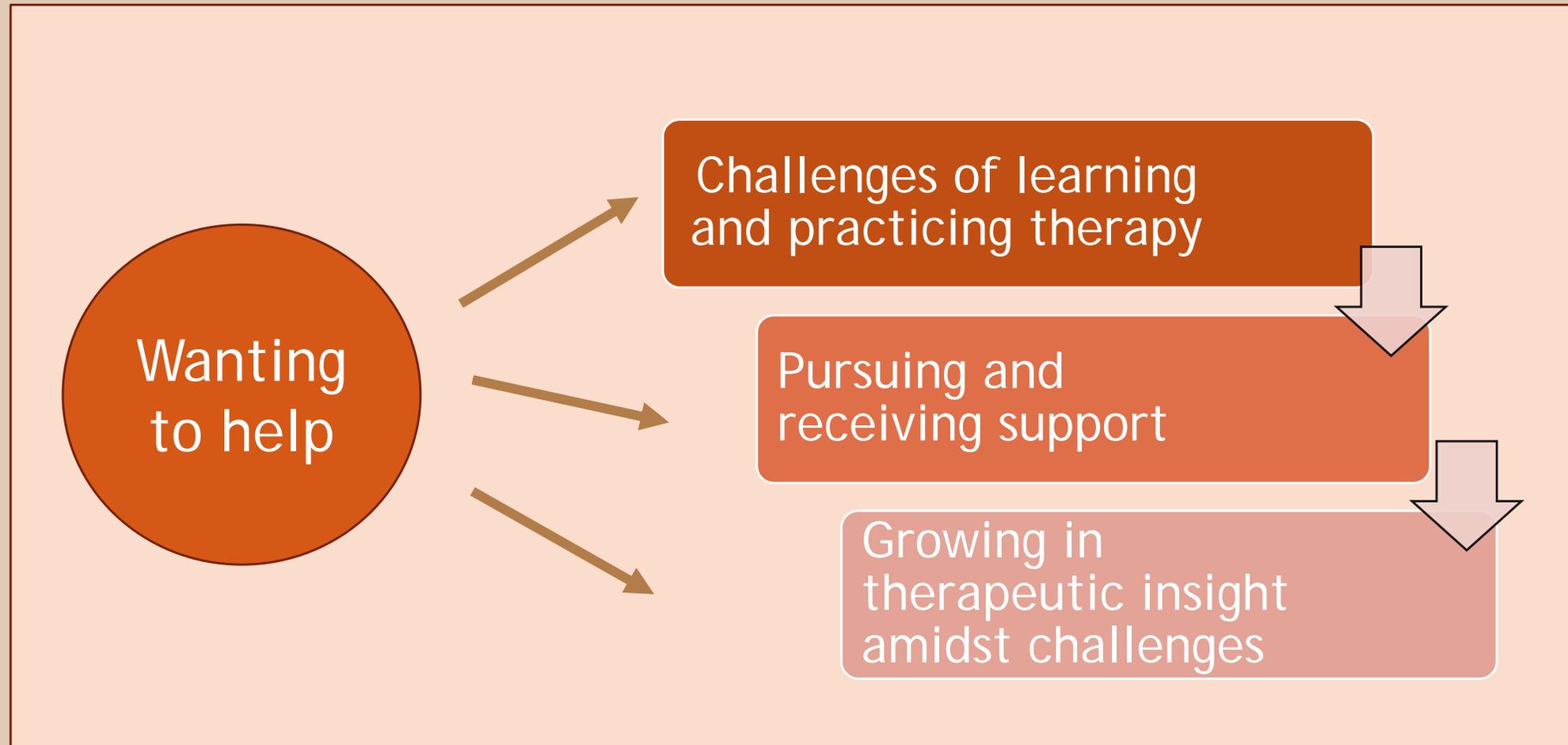
Methodology

- Interviewed by 2nd & 3rd author, December 2015
- Semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions
- Snowball sampling until saturated (N = 12)
 - Therapists in training or actively practicing
- Sample interview questions:
 - *What is your personal experience when clients tell you stories from their life?*
 - *Have you ever felt like the work you do is changing you? If yes, how?*

Constructivist grounded theory

- Coding completed by first and fourth authors
- Analytic process informed by Charmaz (2011)
- Initial line-by-line coding, using constant comparison
- After authors met to discuss initial codes:
 - Focused and theoretical coding
 - Analytic memoing regarding processes relating codes to each other
 - Overarching theory emerged from theoretical categories

Theory of therapists' experiences



Experiencing constraints while working within the larger system

Challenges of practicing therapy

Misunderstanding of psychology

"While, in Cambodia, as I see, normally they see only the outside of the person, they go to get a treatment, go to the doctor, go to the medical doctor, but they lack of care about the inside."

Developmental challenges when learning therapy

"I was not confident to apply EMDR with the client at all, so the supervisor just remind me with how to work."

Being adversely impacted

"It's reminded me about what happened to the client, so it's made me not want to see what happened."

"...they lost the way and they lost the goal to work with the client"

Receiving meaningful support

Valuing peer knowledge and support

"And also my classmate... they help me understand and to me it (like) before the year one we see trauma."

Therapists' families and friends

"...I want to give up... my husband said just put one year in there."

Positive mentorship from supervision

"Here we don't call group supervision... we call spirits you are meeting... reflect on self ... support each other, and make me feel free to share."

Growth amidst challenges

Acknowledging
difficulty and
accepting
limitations

"we need to accept the truth that something that can be our limitation, or our limitation, we need to need to get help from something else, from somebody else."

Growing
professionally

"...we can get seeing different things, like there is not a specific way to work with the client, so we need to be flexible."

Working with
clients
holistically

"...we not only work with the client, but with their family as well because the children will go back to their family. If the family doesn't understand how to support a child, it will happen again."

Working with the larger system

Experiencing
limited
institutional
support

"there is a little to talk that the government, or the ministry, or actually uh, the education as well that is really important that uh, we can formal or informal training or we can have some promotion or something in the media that might be really help, you know? "

Promoting
community
healing

"...the goal is to, to promote the local resource to support mental health in the community because we cannot, go frequently, so people living in the community go to a local helper."

Raising
awareness

"I think that it is useful to spread this knowledge to the communities and so they can notice and they can find the right place to for their treatment."

Implications

- Increase public awareness of therapy
- Increase mental health funding
- Develop supervision programs for Cambodians
- Mindful of training models in US for foreign CFT students:
 - Awareness of unique needs of therapists, depending on context
 - Awareness of cultural practices providing support

Working with the larger system

I think there are a lot of things that we need to work on that have to do with the family, to do with the community, to do with the individual client. So, in working with the client, it's not only us as the therapist, we also need to collaborate well with the case manager or social worker. We need much more support from family, community, from uh case management, from teachers, from parents, a lot of things. I mean happy clients, happy community. A big family. **And then the spread of happy in our country.**

Questions?

Contact Stephanie Armes:
Stephanie.armes25@uga.edu

Selected References

Bockers, E., Stammel, N., & Knasevelsrud, C. (2011). Reconciliation in Cambodia: Thirty years after the terror of the Khmer Rouge regime. *Torture, 21*, 71-83.

Charmaz, K. (2011). A constructivist grounded theory analysis of losing and regaining a valued self. In F. J. Wertz, K. Charmaz, L. M. McMullen, R. Josselson, R. Anderson, & E. McPadden (Eds.), *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis* (pp.165-204). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.

Eng, S., Szmodis, W., & Grace, K. (2017). Cambodian remarried women are at risk for domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 1-26*. doi: 10.1177/0886260517691520

Heuveline, P., & Poch, B. (2006). Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. *Demography, 43*, 99-125.

Jarl, J., Cantor-Graae, E., Chak, T., Sunbaunat, K., & Larsson, C. A. (2015). Trauma and poor mental health in relation to economic status: The case of Cambodia 35 years later. *PLoS ONE, 10*, 1-13. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0136410

Schunert, T., Khann, S., Koa, S., Pot, C., Saupe, L. B., Lahar, C. J....& Nhong, H. (2012). *Cambodian mental health survey report*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Royal University of Phnom Penh Department of Psychology.