

| Project Details | |
|-----------------|---|
| Project Code | MRCNMH25Ba Williamson |
| Title | The Experience and Impact of Psychedelic Therapy as Treatment for Mental Health Disorders in Women Survivors of Sexual Assault |
| Research Theme | Neuroscience & Mental Health |
| Summary | Sexual assault (SA) often leads to mental health difficulties and, as standard treatments have poor response rates, many survivors suffer with long-term mental ill health. Psychedelic therapies have shown promise for mental health difficulties post-trauma; however, research on these therapies for SA survivors is limited. How this treatment is experienced by this patient group is poorly understood. You will explore the lived experience of women SA survivors with mental health disorders, focusing on their experiences of psychedelic treatments in clinical and naturalistic settings. This work will support the development of safer, acceptable treatments for SA survivors in the future |
| Description | Sexual assault (SA) is a major public health issue disproportionately impacting women. 94% of SA survivors experience mental health problems, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Current treatment-as-usual (TAU) pharmacotherapies and talking therapies for SA have high dropout/relapse rates and 50% of SA survivors continue to meet PTSD criteria post-treatment. Psychedelic therapy (PT) is an umbrella term for interventions administering serotonergic hallucinogens (e.g. psilocybin) as well as entactogens (e.g. MDMA) in combination with manualised psychological interventions. Despite the numerous PT trials for PTSD underway, there is a lack of trauma-focused clinical practice guidelines for PT. Studies highlight the significance of PT's non-pharmacological factors for positive patient outcomes, including rapport with the therapist. PT settings are exceptionally intimate (i.e. patient lies in bed with therapist in close proximity for hours long sessions), and the drug effects can produce acute prosocial and interpersonal effects (i.e. feelings of vulnerability and suggestibility). For a population at high risk of re-traumatization when accessing care, optimizing treatment procedures informed by understanding SA survivors' experiences and perceptions of support, safety, and appropriate boundaries in psychedelic treatments is critical. Some PT trials have included women SA survivors. For example, 30% of participants in a recent UK trial of psilocybin for PTSD were SA survivors and significant symptom improvements post-treatment were reported. Nonetheless, most PT trials have been conducted in military veterans which are predominantly male, and those trials with gender mixed samples often do not specify index trauma. Therefore, the experiences of women SA survivors in PT trials, barriers/facilitators to PT treatment and recovery, and women's additional support needs remains poorly understood. Beliefs about PT are also culturally influenced. Few PT studies include ethnic minority samples and, as ethnic minorities disproportionately experience SA, how SA survivors in minority communities perceive and experience |

PT warrants investigation. Finally, given the debilitating nature of mental ill health following SA, the inefficacy of current TAU, and limited access to PT trials, studies have found that hundreds of women SA survivors are attending 'underground' unregulated psychedelic retreats for post-trauma recovery. These women's 'underground' treatment experiences for SA and ongoing support needs remain unknown.

Study aims and research questions: This mixed-method studentship will be the first of its kind to explore the experiences and impact of PT for women SA survivors. The student will address the following questions:

1. How are PT treatments experienced by women SA survivors from different walks of life?
2. What impact does PT have on wellbeing and what barriers/facilitators to PT treatment exist
3. What are women SA survivors' formal/informal support needs following PT?
4. What are the experiences and challenges faced by clinicians providing PT to women SA survivors?

Project plan: To address these questions, this project will use three stages.

Stage 1 will utilise qualitative interviews and explore the lived experiences of women SA survivors who undertake PT as part of a clinical trial and/or 'underground' treatments via psychedelic retreats (target n=25).

Stage 2 will use large secondary dataset of participants (including women SA survivors) who self-report using PT post-trauma to explore the relationship between PT and wellbeing outcomes. This studentship will provide exclusive access to a COMPASS funded project "Symptoms, treatment, self-management and attitudes towards emerging 'psychedelic' treatments in psychological trauma" led by the KCL Psychoactive Trials Group (<https://clinicaltrials.gov/study/NCT05312151>). Please see letter of support confirming access to this dataset. The student will work with this unprecedented dataset that includes clinical and functional impairment outcomes following a range of PT treatments, supervised by international experts in post-trauma mental health (Dr Williamson, Bath; Prof Anke Karl, Exeter) and psychopharmacology (Dr Freeman, Bath; Prof Morgan, Exeter). The student will have the opportunity to learn diverse analytic techniques from the multidisciplinary team, creating a good degree of challenge.

Stage 3 will include a Delphi study as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with leading international PT experts, key stakeholders who provide support to SA survivors, and clinicians (n=25) to explore the experiences and challenges faced in delivering PT to SA survivors and highlight clinician training/support needs for delivering high quality PT and post-trauma care to this under-researched population.

As the first study to explore how SA survivors experience and respond to PT, this studentship will generate findings with potential to inform best practice for PT and future PT protocols. **Knowledge transfer:** In the final three months, the student will engage with women SA survivors, clinical care teams and leading PT experts to create a brief animated video

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| | resource from the study findings. The video, which will be shared across social media platforms and collaborative networks, will provide an evidence-based resource on SA and PT, improving public engagement with PT science and barriers to help-seeking following SA. |
| Supervisory Team | |
| Lead Supervisor | |
| Name | Dr Victoria Williamson |
| Affiliation | Bath |
| College/Faculty | Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Department/School | Psychology |
| Email Address | vw217@bath.ac.uk |
| Co-Supervisor 1 | |
| Name | Dr Tom Freeman |
| Affiliation | Bath |
| College/Faculty | Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Department/School | Psychology |
| Co-Supervisor 2 | |
| Name | Professor Anke Karl |
| Affiliation | Exeter |
| College/Faculty | Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Department/School | Psychology |
| Co-Supervisor 3 | |
| Name | |
| Affiliation | |
| College/Faculty | |
| Department/School | |