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BEING DELIVERED: SPIRITUALITY IN SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Gregory P. Knapik, PhD RN*, **Donna S. Martsof, PhD RN**, and **Claire B. Draucker, PhD RN**
Kent State University, College of Nursing, Kent, Ohio, USA

Abstract

A theoretical framework explaining how survivors of sexual violence use spirituality to respond to or recover from sexual violence is presented. Data were drawn from open-ended interviews of 27 women and 23 men who participated in a larger, ongoing study of women's and men's responses to sexual violence. Grounded theory methodology was used to develop the core category of Being Delivered, reflecting the participants' experiences of being rescued, saved, or set free from the effects of sexual violence by a spiritual being or power. The theoretical framework describing Being Delivered is composed of three dimensions: Spiritual Connection, Spiritual Journey, and Spiritual Transformation. The framework can be used by clinicians to guide discussions of spirituality and healing with survivors of sexual violence.

Sexual violence is a pervasive form of interpersonal violence both nationally and internationally (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998; World Health Organization, 2002). Sexual violence experienced in childhood, adulthood, or both can lead to myriad of long-term psychological (Denov, 2004; Draucker, 2001; Hall, 1999), physiological (Goldberg & Goldstein, 2000; Golding, 1994; Golding, Cooper, & George, 1997), and behavioral (Dimmitt, 1995; Roberts, Reardon, & Rosenfeld, 1999; Seng, Low, Sparbel, & Killion, 2004) consequences. Sequelae of sexual violence include depression; dissociation; chronic health problems, including chronic pelvic pain; drug and alcohol abuse; and interpersonal problems (Goldberg & Goldstein; Roberts et al.; World Health Organization, 2002).

Sexual violence generates both negative and positive spiritual outcomes for female and male survivors. A number of studies have demonstrated that sexual violence has negative effects on survivors' spirituality. Research on outcomes of sexual violence by clergy, for example, has shown that male and female survivors experience a distancing from their religious faith (Mart, 2004), spiritual distress (Fater & Mullaney, 2000), and decreased trust in clergy, church, and God (Fater & Mullaney, 2000; Rossetti, 1995). Male and female survivors of sexual violence by non-clergy perpetrators also have been shown to experience negative spiritual effects, including a distancing from God and their religion (Ganzevoort, 2002; Hall, 1995; Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993), less religious activity (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, &

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Address correspondence to Donna Martsof, 347 Henderson Hall, College of Nursing, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242. dmartsol@kent.edu.

*Dr. Knapik is now associated with the University of Akron, College of Nursing, Akron, Ohio, USA.

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Smith, 1989), and spiritual distress (Lawson et al., 1998). Some survivors, especially men, believe they deserve God's judgment and punishment because of the violence they experienced (Draucker & Petrovic, 1996; Ganzevoort, 2002).

Other researchers have found a beneficial increase in spirituality in response to sexual violence (Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998; Krejci et al., 2004). Aspects of spirituality found to be helpful for women who experienced sexual violence include religious and church support and faith activeness (Oaksford & Frude, 2003; Valentine & Feinhauer, 1993), belief in God's help (Smith & Kelly, 2001), hope and spiritual encouragement (Geisbrecht & Sevcik, 2000), and native cultural identity (Herbert & McCannell, 1997). Though less studied, aspects of spirituality found to be helpful for male survivors of sexual violence include connecting to God and private and group prayer (Draucker & Petrovic, 1996; Ganzevoort, 2002).

Studies specifically focused on spiritually-based recovery treatments are limited. Two small pilot studies of women showed such treatment approaches benefit the spiritual well-being and recovery of sexual violence survivors (Beveridge & Cheung, 2004; Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005).

In addition to inconsistent findings regarding the association between violence and spirituality, little is known about the processes by which survivors of sexual violence respond spiritually to the violence they have experienced. The purpose of this article is to describe a grounded theory study in which a theoretical framework was developed to describe how women and men use spirituality to respond to experiences of sexual violence.

METHOD

Data are drawn from a larger, ongoing study of women's and men's responses to sexual violence. For the parent study, adaptive sampling was used to recruit a sample of 64 female and 57 male survivors of sexual violence. Adaptive sampling is a method of recruiting participants from rare or hidden populations in community-based research (Martsolf, Courey, Chapman, Draucker, & Mims, 2006). Because hidden populations tend to cluster geographically, the target recruitment area is divided into geographic divisions and demographic information is obtained for each division to direct recruitment of participants. For this study, zip codes were used as geographical divisions. An inner city zip code was chosen for initial sampling due to population density and the likelihood that typically hard-to-reach individuals would reside there. Research associates canvassed this zip code by observing the characteristics of the area, including the location of community facilities and social service agencies; meeting community leaders; networking with people on the streets; and posting flyers to describe the study. Initial participants were identified, and these participants encouraged others in the community to participate in the study. When the first zip code area yielded no new participants, subsequent zip codes were systematically chosen with the goal of increasing sample diversity, and recruitment efforts were directed to those zip codes.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained and all participants signed informed consent to participate in the study. Data consisting primarily of audiotaped transcribed interviews were collected over a 17-month period starting in December 2004 and ending in April 2006. Interviews began with the request, "Tell me about the sexual violence you have experienced." Sample follow-up questions included: (a) "Describe your relationship with the person(s) who perpetrated the violence?"; (b) What was it like living through the violence?; (c) How did you manage following the violence?; (d) How do you feel the violence affected your life?; (e) How do you feel you have healed, recovered, or coped with your experience

of sexual violence?; and (f) When did healing, recovering, or coping start?” Review of the interview data of the first several participants revealed that spirituality was a common theme, although there was no specific research question related to spirituality. A question was therefore added to the interview guide in which each subsequent participant was asked, “Can you give me an example of how spirituality, however you define it, helped you with your experience?” A sample of 50 participants who provided robust data regarding the use of spirituality in response to sexual violence was selected for this study.

Grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the interview data to reveal and describe a psychosocial process by which spirituality was used in response to sexual violence. Constant comparative data analysis, an iterative or recursive inductive-deductive process, was used to code the transcripts. Initial line-by-line coding was performed on transcripts in which important data segments were extracted and labeled in a relatively concrete fashion (Schreiber, 2001). These codes were then compared and contrasted to form more abstract concepts. The research team discussed these concepts and proposed potential categories. Theoretical sampling, the collection of additional data to develop emerging categories and determine how they are related to each other for the theoretical framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Schreiber, 2001), was conducted. Theoretical sampling involved adapting the interview to obtain in-depth information about the participants’ spiritual experiences, conducting several second interviews with selected participants whom the team believed could provide more in-depth information regarding spirituality, and gathering additional information on spirituality and sexual violence from the professional literature. Through theoretical sampling, saturation of the categories was achieved and the framework was developed. A table was created listing categories that comprised the framework, and all data segments were coded to each category.

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All methodological and analytic decisions were discussed in team meetings for the purposes of peer debriefing. A detailed audit trail, including written and electronic records was maintained. The investigators produced memos at all stages of theory development. The findings were presented to a community advisory board consisting of directors of area agencies who provide services to victims of violence, and feedback was obtained about the clinical applications of the findings.

RESULTS

The Sample

The sample consisted of 27 females and 23 males. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 62 years; 50% were between 40 and 50 years of age. Forty-six percent of the sample were African-American ($n = 23$), and 36% were Caucasian ($n = 18$). Forty-eight percent ($n = 24$) were single, 24% ($n = 12$) were married, 12% ($n = 6$) were divorced, 6% ($n = 3$) were separated, and one was engaged. Sixty-two percent of the participants were parents ($n = 31$); the average number of children they had was three. The largest group of participants (28%, $n = 14$) came from a single person household. The majority of the participants (52%, $n = 26$) had an income under \$10,000; 24% ($n = 12$) had an income between \$10,000 and \$30,000.

The Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework explaining how survivors use spirituality in response to sexual violence is depicted in Figure 1. A core category in grounded theory accounts for the variation in the data and best links the categories together to reveal the basic psychosocial process (Schreiber, 2001). The core category, labeled “Being Delivered,” reflects the participants’ descriptions of being rescued, saved, or set free from the effects of sexual

violence by a spiritual being or power. The participants stated, “[God is] taking me, in a good way, taking me towards a good place,” and “[having a] higher power by my side ... holding my hand ... leading me.” One participant stated, “I was delivered.”

The arrows in the model reflect the generally progressive nature of the process. Being Delivered began for all the participants with a “Spiritual Connection” with a divine being or power. For many participants, this connection led to one or more of three types of “Spiritual Journeys”. For a few participants, the spiritual journey culminated in a “Spiritual Transformation.”

Spiritual Connection

The first dimension in the framework is labeled Spiritual Connection. All participants expressed connecting, or attempting to connect, in a divine manner with another being, often God or a higher power. Spiritual connections were not similar to ordinary interpersonal relationships, but rather were deeply personal and meaningful bonds. The participants’ descriptions of the experience of Spiritual Connection suggest this experience has four characteristics: communion, presence, passion, and perpetuity.

The first characteristic of Spiritual Connection is communion, the “sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings” (Oxford, 2002, p. 280). The term communion was chosen to convey the participants’ experiences of Spiritual Connection through intimate, heart-felt communication with God or a higher power, often through prayer. Participants connected with God by praying privately, worshipping in public, and being prayed for by others. The participants indicated they would “talk to God most of all,” “pray every day,” and “pray about other people.” Several participants also referred to sharing spiritual thoughts and feelings in Bible studies, in church services, and in relationships with other church members. A few participants spoke of long-term and meaningful relationships with clergy and supportive relationships within their religious communities that supported their Spiritual Connection. A 50-year-old woman who experienced an episode of adult sexual violence experienced communion with God after humans failed her. She stated, “You just want to be loved and then you can’t get it from the human type so you get it from God.” Another participant who survived a lifetime of sexual violence described a powerful experience of prayer:

God, most of all, that’s who I talk to most of all. Like sometimes I wanted Pastor and she’s busy and I don’t have anybody, I don’t have a lot of friends so there’s nobody to really talk to other than my children, I would talk to God. I would say, “You’ve kept me this long...” But I think you just have to go inside yourself and mostly talk to God, mostly talk to God. ... Prayer, that’s all I had.

Another characteristic of Spiritual Connection is presence, a “divine or supernatural spirit felt to be present” (Random House Webster’s, 2001, p. 1529). This term was chosen to reflect the participants’ experiences of Spiritual Connection through a strong sense of the presence of a divine being in their lives. Many believed this presence had been life-changing and was experienced as a blessing or as received grace. Participants stated, “I have been blessed in many ways” and “only by the grace of God.” The characteristic of presence was experienced by a participant who was told by a physician that she was infertile, and then became pregnant after unwanted sex. She referred to her baby son by exclaiming, “He’s been a blessing. ... God works in mysterious ways.” Another participant who used his experience as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse to reach out to youth as a high school coach stated, “God got me in this position.”

A third characteristic of Spiritual Connection is passion, an “intense desire or enthusiasm for something” (Oxford, 2002, p. 997). This term was chosen to reflect how strongly the

participants' felt about their Spiritual Connection. Their passion for their divinity, their faith, or their beliefs was expressed emphatically through their words; the tone and volume of voice; and their facial expressions, hand motions, and other body language. A 25-year-old woman who had experienced three episodes of childhood sexual abuse revealed that her sister commented that God has a plan for her. The participant expressed her passion in connecting with God's love:

[My sister said] "He has a plan for you," and I just wept, because I just remember feeling like me, just me, He has a plan for just me. You know, and just feeling like I'm that loved, you know, no matter how anybody else has failed or I've failed myself, He loves me that much. Absolutely!

The last characteristic of spiritual connection is perpetuity, an "end-less or indefinitely long duration or existence" (Random House Webster's, 2001, p. 1444). This term reflects the participants' references to the timelessness of their Spiritual Connection. They stated, "I always ave God," "my faith never wavered," and "God's willing to help out for the rest of my life." A potent example of the sense of perpetuity was shared by a 47-year-old woman who survived a lifetime of abuse:

I was like "Oh, God how do I face the past?" and He said "I'm with you, always, even up to the end," and I started thinking about that. This week if I hadn't been spiritually lifted in the word I don't know what I might have done but just knowing that in the word of God has given us, saying I'm with you always.

Spiritual Journey

For many participants, a meaningful Spiritual Connection allowed them to begin a Spiritual Journey that was associated with healing. The term journey, defined as "a passage or progress from one stage to another" (Random House Webster's, 2001, p. 1034) is used to reflect an ongoing spiritual process with direction and purpose. Not all participants who had made a Spiritual Connection described a Spiritual Journey; those who did were those who had a particularly powerful connection to a divine being or robust ties to a spiritual community. The Spiritual Journey could involve three paths: being sustained, being awakened, and being tested. Some participants followed primarily one path, whereas others followed more than one.

Being sustained is a path of the Spiritual Journey that involves being "strengthened and supported physically or mentally" (Oxford, 2002, p. 1703). Many participants described being accompanied, protected, shielded, healed, and unburdened by a divine being. The 47-year-old female survivor described earlier said of God, "What I'm going through now, You [are] experiencing, too. Whatever I go through, You [are] right there with me going through it." A woman who had been molested and raped by older children as a child shared her experience of being sustained:

Being in the church, I believe that, if you take a problem that's really heavy on you, that you don't really want to deal with, or is hard for you to deal with. If you talk to God about it, and in a sense give it to him, give him that problem, it takes a lot, and it did, it takes a lot from you to lift, like a weight been lifted off your shoulders. That's what I did. I prayed about it, and that's what He did. He took that from me, I mean, before I did that I cried about it a lot. And like I said, I might think about it every once in a while, and I remember that I gave him that problem, that I don't have to think about that problem no more, I don't have to let it affect my life.

Being sustained was also a crucial path for a participant without traditional religious beliefs:

If I'm going to talk about a higher power that's what it is, it's a good orderly direction. It's not leading me someplace bad, it's loving and it's caring and it wants to bring me into a new world, a new life, it wants to hold my hand like I'm a little kid and say here, this is the way to go, here's the sunshine, here's the rainbow, here's the flowers. You know that type of setting, it's not dark, gloomy, the path I usually walk is the dark gloomy path by myself, so right now it's with a higher power by my side. I have a higher power holding my hand and He's leading me down this path that's real sunny and real bright and cheerful. And you know I'm not all the way in there yet.

Another path of the Spiritual Journey is being awakened. Awaken is defined as "to come to bring to an awareness, becoming cognizant" (Random House Webster's, 2001, p. 144). Participants described experiencing new ways of thinking, seeing the truth, or coming to view events from a divine perspective. Participants often conveyed this awakening as an introspective "Ah-ha" experience. A man who had survived child-hood sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse by his mother, drug addiction, and three rapes while in prison, shared an experience of being awakened:

So to not have drugs to cope, now I gotta learn how to cope all over again, so it's like I'm an infant, I have a little bit of self-defense, I mean I can, I can, which I believe it's my higher power that helps me, it's not a lot, it's what they call hope. You know I have a little hope today that you know if I stand up for myself then I can get better. And that's where I'm at you know, I'm standing up for myself. I'm still, I'm, I'm you know I haven't completely, you know completely gotten the program again, but you know I'm slowly grabbing hold of what needs to be done today for me, you know, I'm having that hope, that little bit of uh, understanding about myself. Like I said it's a new way of life, that means I have to change every part, every aspect of what I've always, like talking, language. So it's more of a new way.

Being tested was also a path of the Spiritual Journey. Being tested is undergoing a "situation that reveals the strength or quality of someone or something by putting them under strain" (Oxford, 2002, p. 1433). Participants referred to experiencing trials, tests, and tribulations from God and growing stronger as a result of these challenges. They stated, "There was a reason I was going through this, God won't put me through more than I can handle;" "I kept asking the Lord why am I here, what is my purpose;" and "It was all a part of what I had to go through and what He [God] is going to accomplish." A few participants shared feeling a kinship with individuals in scripture stories who had experienced suffering. A man who had been sexually assaulted as an adult offered a poignant reflection on being tested:

I look at it like this, God tests us, you know. The Israelites you know going out of Egypt and stuff, and a lot of us have failed, whether it's Christians or whatever denomination you happen to be ... God tests us, you know, tests our resolve and puts little trials and tribulations upon us to see, first of all, to see how strong our faith is and how committed we are and, um, you know, I honestly feel you know it says somewhere in the Bible, what we go through for his sake you know to make us stronger [persons].

Spiritual Transformation

For a few participants, a Spiritual Journey resulted in the third dimension of Being Delivered, which is labeled as Spiritual Transformation. Transformation is defined as "a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance" (Oxford, 2002, p. 1481). This type of change was described by some participants who came to view their violence in a spiritually meaningful way and who experienced a profound sense of divine intervention in their lives

as a result of the violence. Spiritual Transformation was experienced as lasting and permeating. Those participants who described a Spiritual Transformation had Spiritual Journeys that were particularly intense and life-changing. For the most part, those who did not experience a Spiritual Transformations had had their Spiritual Journeys interrupted by ongoing abuse or other life challenges. As Being Delivered is a progressive and life-long process, many participants may have the potential to experience a Spiritual Transformation, but had not yet done so. Spiritual Transformation is manifested in two ways: transformative meaning and transcendence.

Some participants described coming to believe that the sexual violence they experienced, while traumatic, had served an important purpose in their lives. Because the meaning they attributed to the violence changed in a significant way, this process is labeled as transformative meaning. Transformative meaning has two elements that are referred to as redemptive revival and inspiration. Redemptive ["acting to save someone from error or evil" (Oxford, 2002, p. 1138)] revival ["restoration to life, consciousness, vigor, strength, etc." (Random House Webster's, 2001, p. 1648)] occurred when participants experienced being saved from the evil, trials, mistakes or failings related to their sexual violence and, as a result, enjoyed a sense of spiritual renewal. Many expressed that their redemption came from God. They stated, "God said I'm not bad," "God's voice telling me, this was not your fault," and "only God can break that cycle." Some participants, especially those who had become perpetrators of violence themselves, believed they had to repent and make life style changes before experiencing forgiveness. A sense of revival was reflected in statements such as, "I thank God I'm saved and delivered from all that," and "[I accepted] Jesus Christ as my personal savior." The meaning of the violence for these participants, therefore, was changed from a negative life experience to one associated with divine mercy and spiritual renewal. A 46-year-old woman who had experienced a lifetime of sexual violence described an experience of redemptive revival:

It was a healing process. You know, sometimes, you don't know you're hurting. Sometimes you don't know you are a wounded person, but what is that scripture "a new being in Christ, he's a new creature, the old things have passed away and behold all things become new." And that's basically the truth, I had a new way of doing things, a new way, even though I have fallen and sinned, "all have sinned," that's right.

The experience of transformative meaning also is associated with a sense of inspiration, the "process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative" (Oxford, 2002, p. 690). Participants described having a deep urge, desire, or hope to do something, especially something creative, with the sacred gifts they had received as a result of the violence. Participants had used several outlets for their inspiration, such as involvement in music ministry, volunteer work, and group Bible study. One participant stated, "God has put me in a ministry, on the path to help hurting women and a few occasional men." Another participant shared finding inspiration through participation in this research, "This study I felt was a blessing ... I'm going to help somebody else."

Some participants who experienced Spiritual Transformation did so through what they considered to be a supernatural experience. These experiences are labeled as transcendence, "(of God) existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe" (Oxford, 2002, p. 1480). This term was chosen to reflect participants' descriptions of experiencing profound divine, other-worldly, intervention in their lives. Several referred to positive life experiences as miracles given by God. One participant said, "It was a miracle" when she found out her medical condition (Hepatitis C) was gone. A 43-year-old woman who survived childhood and teenage sexual abuse described an experience of transcendence; she stated, "I just started seeing miracles in my life and I think that's what kept me clear the

whole two years, I was seeing miracle after miracle after miracle, they were all miracles going on in my life.” The experiences of transcendence and transformative meaning were iterative; attributing a spiritual meaning to the violence opened participants up to transcendent experiences, which in turn increased their sense of how the violence had transformed their lives.

DISCUSSION

For many survivors of sexual violence, spirituality is an integral aspect of the healing process. The theoretical framework depicted in Figure 1 reflects a complex psychosocial process in which the survivors of sexual violence experience Being Delivered by a divine being. Having a strong spiritual connection creates for survivors the possibility of being supported and guided in their struggles, obtaining new insights that aid in their recovery, and acquiring strength as a result of passing spiritual challenges. For some, these experiences result in profound spiritual changes as survivors come to attribute spiritual meaning to their violence and experience divine interventions that change the course of their lives. The progression from spiritual connection to spiritual journey to spiritual transformation represents a deepening and intensifying of “Being Delivered” from sexual violence.

Many aspects of the theoretical framework are consistent with other research on spirituality and sexual violence. Our finding that the process of Being Delivered contributes to healing is consistent with the results of a systematic review conducted by Shaw and colleagues (2005) that revealed religion and spirituality are usually beneficial to trauma recovery (including sexual violence), and that experiencing trauma can lead to a deepening of religion and spirituality. The results of the current research also confirm the findings of other studies that reveal an association between spirituality and healing in survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Oaksford & Frude, 2003; Valentine & Feinhauer, 1993) rape (Smith & Kelly, 2001), and adult abuse (Geisbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). Several dimensions of the framework resonate with constructs investigated in prior studies. Other researchers have discussed the importance of a divine connection to God or Higher Power, other persons, nature, and one’s self for male (Draucker & Petrovic, 1996) and female survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Glaister & Abel, 2001). Support for the three Spiritual Journeys is also found in the literature. Several studies of abuse survivors discuss the importance of receiving support or guidance from an ongoing relationship with the divine being (Ganzevoort, 2002; Taylor & Outlaw 2002; Woodard and Sowell, 2001); this is reminiscent of the path of “being sustained.” Draucker and Stern’s (2000) study of 23 female survivors of sexual violence by male intimates revealed processes similar to “being tested” and “being awakened.” These researchers found that women who experienced significant violence and abuse throughout their lives engaged in a process of reclaiming their spirit. This process is similar to being awakened in so far as the women had to recover their vitality and the “animating force” that had been destroyed by years of abuse. These women also reported making sense of the violence by coming to believe that their violence and abuse served as a test provided by God through which they could become stronger; this experience was consistent with the path of being tested.

There are several limitations to the data. Ethnic groups of Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern origin were not well-represented in the sample, and therefore the influence of a variety of ethnic influences on spiritual healing could not be explored. Most notably, the sample did not include a diversity of religious faiths; most participants identified Christianity as their religion. While the experiences of Spiritual Connection, Spiritual Journey, and Spiritual Transformation may be shared by those of different faiths, this would need to be studied. In addition, the study is a retrospective study in which participants

reported on spiritual experiences that may have happened many years ago, and the data therefore may suffer from recall biases.

Based on the findings of this study, several areas of future research are suggested. This study was based on a group of participants who experienced a wide range of sexual violence experiences, from ongoing and persistent episodes of childhood sexual abuse to one-time experiences of sexual assault in adulthood. More work needs to be done to understand the relationships among the extent and type of sexual violence experienced and spiritual healing. Other potential influences on spiritual healing, including the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, the age and gender of the victim at the time of the assault, and other coping variables also warrant further investigation.

These findings of this study have implications for clinical practice. The theoretical framework of Being Delivered can be used by clinicians to guide discussions of spirituality and healing with survivors. The findings indicate that spirituality in survivors is expressed as a multi-dimensional and dynamic process. The findings do not suggest that religious dogma played a significant role in healing; rather what was important was the survivors' relationship with a divine being, the spiritual path they took, and the possibility of a transformative spiritual experience. If a survivor wishes to explore how their spirituality might aid in healing, the model can help identify where in the process of Being Delivered they consider themselves to be and open up the possibility of future spiritual growth. Clinicians should appreciate that the process of Being Delivered will be unique for each survivor and each survivor may be at a different stage in the process. The model, however, represents common experiences shared by our sample, and these experiences can serve as a springboard to address the role of spirituality in healing among other survivors.

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Figure 1.
Theoretical framework of “Being Delivered” from sexual violence.