

BREAKDOWNS TO BREAKTHROUGHS: GROWTH AFTER INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) OF FILIPINO WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Many Filipino women experience trauma from their past romantic relationship and grow from that experience. However, local literature about this phenomenon is still lagging. This study aimed to analyze the narratives of Filipino women who experienced intimate partner violence and its psychological impact, understand the factors that influenced their psychological growth, and identify domains of posttraumatic growth. Fifteen (15) participants were interviewed about their experience, and themes were formed through thematic analysis. The themes that emerged in the dataset were divided into four categories: (1) intimate partner violence experienced; (2) psychological impact of the trauma, (3) trauma to recovery; and (4) domains of posttraumatic growth experienced. Results were interpreted using the framework of Posttraumatic Growth. Clinical implications were discussed based on the results.

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, Psychological Impact, Posttraumatic Growth

INTRODUCTION

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a global social issue. After conducting a study across ten countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Pacific Islands, South America and Africa, the World Health Organization concluded that Intimate Partner Violence happens regardless of religion, socioeconomic status, and nationality (Violence Against Women, 2021). In 2011 alone, more than a million individuals reported experiencing incidents of violence from their former or current partners, girlfriend, boyfriend or spouse (Valdez & Lilly, 2014). Past research shows that people who experienced violence inflicted by close relationships predict more harmful outcomes than those experienced by non-close relationships or by environmental factors like war, near-death experience and life-threatening sickness (Kline & Palm Read, 2020). Literature says that IPV elicits more shame, low self-esteem, and distress than non-personal trauma (Wamser-Nanney et al., 2018; Platt & Freyd, 2015). It is also concluded that when trauma is received from a close relationship, it predicts higher personality disorder symptoms and suicidal behavior (Rickman et al., 2021).

With this information, it is important to study this phenomenon to prevent future cases and to develop intervention for the victims.

IPV is operationally defined as any intentional behavior of an individual that causes psychological, physical, sexual or financial harm to their intimate partner (World Health Organization, 2021). These behaviors include, but not limited to, physical aggression, sexual coercion, manipulation, humiliation, threats of harm, isolation from family and friends, and restriction or denial of access to healthcare or financial resources. IPV may happen from adolescence to adulthood. This may also happen in teenagers who marry young, married couples, cohabitating couples, and even in informal partnerships like dating, boyfriend-girlfriend and engaged relationships. IPV is often used interchangeably with domestic abuse. While there is a striking similarity with these two phenomena, domestic abuse also pertains to violence against children and parents, siblings, and other extended family members; henceforth, family violence (Flury et al. 2010). Intimate Partner Violence is specific with individuals who are romantically involved.

Another concept related to Intimate Partner Violence is Interpersonal Trauma. Interpersonal Trauma is a category of traumatic experiences received from a perpetrator that is known to the victim (Hughesdon et al. 2021). Although victims of IPV are traumatized by their interpersonal relationships, interpersonal trauma can also be used to describe any event that is unintentional but painful, like a death of a family member or discord of a group of friends. It can also pertain to any type of relationship, from acquaintances, friends, and family members. Intimate Partner Violence captures the type of relationship and the experiences of the participants more accurately than all of the other terms mentioned above.

A nationally representative sample study of more than 11,000 Filipino women and girls describes experiencing emotional, physical and sexual abuse from their romantic partners (Yoshioka et al., 2020). The study showed that 23.9 percent of the samples identified experiencing violence from their current relationships, inability to refuse sexual advances, and acceptance that there are valid reasons for their partner's aggressive behavior. Most violent partners explain their behavior with alcoholism, jealousy, and the other partner as insinuating violence (Ansara & Hindin, 2009). In addition, in a community-based study of Filipinos living in the United States, it was found that Filipinos experience more IPV than their Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese respondents (Leung & Cheung, 2008). In the Philippines, efforts to eliminate violence against women are observed. Despite this, one in four women aged fifteen to forty-nine is still affected by this phenomenon (Violence Against Women, 2022). This shows that IPV is commonly experienced by Filipinos yet empirical studies regarding their experiences after IPV are still lacking.

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as the positive psychological change that a person experiences following a traumatic event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The most comprehensive theory about posttraumatic growth is that of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). Their model explains that when a person experiences a traumatic event, their assumptions about the world are challenged. They begin to question their beliefs about life and

the world. When they are faced with the aftermath of trauma, they become unsure of their identity, security and relationships. As they go through this transformative process of understanding this new information about themselves and the world around them, they develop psychological strength as they attempt to psychologically survive and make sense of what happened to them. Although the event itself is still distressing, they psychologically grow when they reconstruct their beliefs and assumptions, and they also feel positive affect throughout the years, in relation to the aftermath of traumatic events. The most reported domains of posttraumatic growth are greater appreciation of life and a rearrangement of priorities, more meaningful relationships with other people, increased personal strength, increase in spirituality or existentialism, and recognition of new possibilities in life. PTG is also different from resilience, optimism, psychological wellbeing and hardiness (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). While all the mentioned constructs are related to how people handle the adversities they experience in life, PTG pertains to the positive result of the adversity rather than management of post trauma symptoms.

Over the past decade, psychotrauma studies have been focused on Posttraumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), primarily on veterans. However, growing research indicates that not all post trauma is PTSD, especially if there is a close relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (Vandervoortet & Rokach, 2006). An individual who experienced interpersonal trauma from a close relationship like a family member, a lover or a friend shows a shattered assumption not only about themselves but also about the people around them and the world in general, which results in more harmful outcomes (Kaufman et al., 2018). A study comparing the effects of trauma type to posttraumatic growth revealed that trauma experienced from romantic partners predicts higher PTG in terms of seeing new possibilities and opportunities in life, gaining personal strength, and spiritual change when compared to those whose worst life trauma is experienced from bereavement, physical assault, rape, and illness of someone close to them (Lowe et al. 2020).

Some Filipino women build tolerance to abuse due to fear of being blamed as the reason for the abuse they received, the negative association of the society ascribed to separated women, culture of silence because partner abuse is considered a private issue and should be dealt in private, normalization of violence, lack of resources, and limited community programs (Garcia, 2020). A phenomenological study done locally described the experiences of battered Filipino women who stayed in the relationship and those who left (Estrellado & Loh, 2016). The study described those who left the relationship as experiencing financial difficulties, and the dynamics of a family led by a single mother affected the children emotionally. On the other hand, women who left the relationship had many important gains as well. They regained their sense of identity, freedom, self-respect, peace, and hope. Although terminating the abusive relationship results in many adjustments, studies showed that their psychological well-being after separation significantly increased over time (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). The process of leaving an abusive relationship is perplexing, but when individuals are finally able to escape it, they experience growth in many domains of life. For instance, a study shows that women who experienced the lowest quality of marriages gained higher life satisfaction after separation (Bourassa, 2015) than those who experienced a good quality of marriage before separation, confirming the findings of other studies that posttraumatic growth is maximized at the resolution of the trauma.

Although the idea of growth from suffering is not new, as seen in many religious and philosophical thinking, it is only in the 1990s that researchers started to empirically conceptualize posttraumatic growth. Even though there is already a considerable amount of literature to understand its concept (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Seery, 2011; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004; Taylor, 1983), many research gaps are yet to be addressed especially in the local setting since posttraumatic growth studies are mostly based on other developing countries, their experiences, and theoretical guidelines (Gultiano et al. 2007). As seen in a PTG study done in Japan (Taku et al., 2012), Western and Eastern cultures predict different results when comparing US and non-US samples.

It is a well accepted fact in cross-cultural psychology that westerners are leaning on individualism mentality and easterners are leaning on the collectivism mentality (Cohen et al., 2016). Having this in mind, the researcher focused on trauma experienced from intimate romantic relationships. Up to this point, there are very few, if any, studies done about the posttraumatic growth of Filipinos who experienced IPV. The closest scholarly study done locally about PTG is with resilience, but all has been in relation with poverty (Ramalho, 2020), employment experiences (Isidro & Calleja, 2021), and disaster response (Maquiling et al. 2021).

There is limited literature to analyzed the narratives of individuals who experienced intimate partner violence and how they grew psychologically afterwards. Although empirical studies about IPV have increased over the decade, there is a considerable research gap on studies on how they develop PTG (Valdez & Lilly, 2014). Only one study focused on survivors of IPV; however, the study's objective is only to measure if survivors of IPV developed posttraumatic growth (Cobb et al. 2006). A decade after, only two studies focused on the growth of IPV victims. One study focused on the schematic reconstruction process of the victims (Valdez & Lilly, 2015) and another literature studied the systems that victims used to achieve growth from their experience (Brosi et al., 2019). While the risk factors, perpetrator-victim processes, and reverberations of the experience are widely documented, positive impact or growth is still largely unexplored.

This is the gap that this study attempted to address. It aimed to describe the intimate partner violence experiences of Filipino women, describe the factors influencing their psychological growth from that experience, and identify domains of posttraumatic growth.

METHODOLOGY

The Participants

A total of 29 samples were recruited online through purposive sampling and snowball technique. Out of 29, only 15 individuals were contacted to be the participants. Participants were those who were identified

as someone who experienced intimate partner violence and has been separated from their partner for more than two years. Posttraumatic growth and time elapsed from the time of the event were positively correlated, as seen in a meta-analysis (Levi-Belz et al. 2021). Therefore, the inclusion criteria for at least 2 years since the separation was done to increase the probability that the person already developed PTG and to prevent retraumatization of the participants. The participants in the meta-analysis who experienced relationship trauma showed the least increase in their posttraumatic growth when the testing happened 1-2 years after the event or especially if in less than one year. The most significant increase in posttraumatic growth was nine to ten years after the event.

Considering the change in the structure of union in the Philippines, those who were previously married and involved in cohabitation relationships were accepted to the study. Filipinos have been found to be waiting longer before they get married, as influenced by their educational level and areas of residence. It results in the decreasing rate of legal marriages and the increasing rate of cohabitation in Filipino couples, especially in the younger age groups (Abalos, 2014). However, the third participant revealed in the interview that she did not live together with her previous relationship, but they were engaged. When she was about to get married after a couple of years, she experienced psychological distress and realized that this triggered her unresolved trauma.

Later on, she was diagnosed with anxiety disorder and is still currently undergoing therapy. Reflexivity required reassessment of the inclusion criteria. It has been realized that the status of the relationship (married, living together, engaged or just boyfriend-girlfriend relationship), does not predict a hierarchy of trauma. Therefore, it was decided that those who were previously engaged and were in boyfriend-girlfriend relationship status would be accepted to the study as well.

Only females were accepted to participate in the study, but those who identified themselves as lesbians or bisexuals were accepted in the study as well. Women are most often victims of abuse be-

cause they are less likely to be violent and even when they are, husbands and fathers still demonstrate greater intensity of violence (Mandal & Hindin, 2013). The participants were 15 females, two of them identifying as an LGBTQIA+, with an average age of 30 years old. Their length of relationship varied from 1 month to 10 years and above, with an average of 39 months. A minimum of 2 years since the separation was required, and the average is 6 years since separation when the interview was conducted. Emotional abuse was the most common type of abuse experienced by the participants, followed by psychological abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Eight (8) out of 15 of the participants experienced being abused several times, 4 experienced being abused for years, and 3 experienced being abused for only one time.

Distress Protocol

Considering the sensitive subject of the research, participation was completely voluntary. Ethics approval was sought and approved. No conflicts of interest was observed. The risks and benefits of the study were discussed in the informed consent form and at the interview. Throughout the interview, this distress protocol was observed:

The interview was terminated when the participant felt uncomfortable to proceed or decided to continue at a later time. The researcher paused when the participant showed distress like sweating, irregular breathing, or panic. The participant was asked if they wanted to continue with the interview or if they needed a break. The interview did not proceed unless the participant was calm and collected. The participant was also asked for a contact number of a family member who can be physically with them in case of emergency. The participant was asked if they wished to be referred to a mental health professional and they were given a list if they requested. The participant was asked if the researcher can contact them later in the day and the following day to ensure that they are no longer distressed. General references about the research topic were also given if they wished to learn more about the study. Lastly, the contact information of the researcher was also provided.

Participants who were emotional during the interview were asked how their experience of the interview was and if the researcher could help in any way. All of the participants indicated that it was a relief to talk about their experiences, and even though it was emotional, being able to talk about it made them realize that they are already far from that experience. Aside from that, the participants also expressed pride in knowing that their story would be a basis for a study that could potentially help other people going through the same experience. Lastly, participants were contacted a day after to check in on them, if they have any questions or if they feel distressed after the interview. The participants let the researcher know that there were no triggers and relapses after the interview.

Research Instruments

Demographic Information Questionnaire (DIQ)

DIQ is a questionnaire designed by the researcher to gather information about the demographic characteristics of the participants. Among these questions include age, sex (Male or Female), civil status (Single, Married, Separated/Annulled, or Widowed), educational background (did not complete high school, high school diploma, college degree, graduate studies), and occupation status (unemployed, employed, freelance). This included a section where they were asked about their previous traumatic relationships like length of relationship, length of abuse and the number of years or months that elapsed since separation.

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory - Short Form (PTGI-SF)

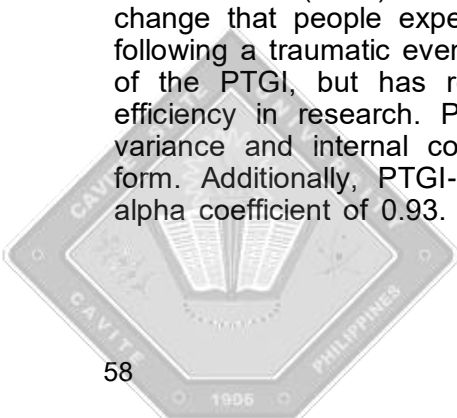
PTGI-SF is a standardized scale designed by Cann et al. (2010) to measure the positive change that people experience in themselves following a traumatic event. It is the adaptation of the PTGI, but has reduced its items for efficiency in research. PTGI-SF captures the variance and internal consistency as the full form. Additionally, PTGI-SF has a coefficient alpha coefficient of 0.93. PTGI consisted of 10

items where the participants rated in a 6-point scale on how much they can relate to the situation described. The scale was based on the five factor model of Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) which are new possibilities, relating to other people, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. Sample items included *"I changed my priorities about what is important in life"*, *"I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life"* and *"I am able to do better things with my life"*. Answers were summed then divided by 10. The average score ranged from 1-50. The average score was interpreted as low (0-10), below average (11-20), average (21-30), above average (31-40), and high (41-50) PTG. PTGI-SF was used as a cut-off score instrument in the study. Only those participants who scored above average and high posttraumatic growth were contacted for an interview. This was to ensure that participants would be able to give insights about posttraumatic growth.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering was done online to protect all parties from the COVID-19 pandemic. First, interested participants were given consent forms where the general objectives of the study were explained. They were informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time and asked that their data be removed from the data if they wish to do so. Should they decide to continue, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Once the participant understood the details of their participation, they were asked to answer the Demographic Information Questionnaire and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory Short - Form. These tools were used to select the participants. Only those who scored above average and high were accepted into the study. This was to increase the likelihood that the participants would provide insights on the topic of the study.

The interview started with rapport-building and an introduction to the study. Then, the researcher read the informed consent form and asked the participants if they had any questions. The researcher proceeded with the semi-



structured interview questions that were designed to draw out their experiences.

Data Analysis

The study utilized phenomenological design, a framework that describes the commonalities of a certain experience among several individuals (Creswell, 2018). Data from the study were analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying and analyzing themes emerging from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme is a pattern of response from the data that represents meaning in relation to the research question. It was considered the most appropriate approach to meet the objectives of this study. The first step of the analysis involved transcribing the interviews. Then, two trained and experienced coders were hired to code the interviews and identify themes with the main researcher. Since the coders were outsiders in the study, they were able to provide objectivity in the study. The codes had five categories: intimate partner violence experience, psychological experience of the trauma,

immediate effects after the separation, factors that facilitated posttraumatic growth, and the domains of posttraumatic growth. After two weeks, the coders and the researcher compared their codes to check inter-coder reliability. Clarification about the codes was done and consensus was made and themes were formed by the researcher. Lastly, interpretations were drawn using the Posttraumatic Growth framework of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004).

RESULTS

The themes that emerged in the dataset were divided into four categories: (1) intimate partner violence experienced, which describes the type of abuse that the participants had; (2) psychological impact of the trauma; (3) trauma to recovery, which describes the events, people and factors that facilitated growth; and (4) domains of posttraumatic growth experienced in the present, which describes the different areas of growth the participants experienced which were not evident in their lives prior the trauma experienced.

Table 1. Superordinate themes and subthemes

SUPERORDINATE THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Intimate Partner Violence Experience	Psychological Aggression Physical Violence Financial Abuse Sexual Trauma Shattered Assumptions Neglected Needs
Psychological Impact of Trauma	Diminished Self-worth Sense of Betrayal Psychological Distress Mental Resolve
Trauma to Recovery	Meaning Making and Cognitive Reconstruction Industry Psychological Help Meeting after the Relationship Social Support Interpersonal Relationships
Domains of Posttraumatic Growth	Appreciation of Life New Possibilities in Life Personal Strength Spiritual Strength

Intimate Partner Violence Experience

This theme describes the IPV that the participants experienced from their partners. It describes the nature of the abuse they received, as well the impact it had on them. Aside from that, this theme also describes the actions they took in response to the abuse.

Psychological Aggression

The most common experience among the participants was the infidelity of their partners. The discovery of the infidelity caused great psychological distress, often making the participants feel depressed, confused, insecure and afraid. Most of the participants decided to separate after finding out about the infidelity, but a number of them tried to stay in the relationship but eventually left after experiencing their partners cheating again. Most of the participants who have children with their ex-partners struggled with their decision partly due to their romantic feelings but also because of the benefits of having a two-parent household.

Another common experience among the participants was the controlling behavior of their partners. Most of them were restricted on the clothes they can wear, the people they can talk to, the jobs they can take, and the decision they should make. This control creates a feeling of dependency to their ex-partner, insecurity of their own decision making, isolation from their friends and acquaintances, and regret of lost opportunities [Interview Excerpt 1]. Usually, the participants endured this controlling behavior during the course of their relationship, a number of them willingly allowed themselves to be dominated by their ex-partners and minimized it into normal jealousy or manly leadership. In hindsight, however, they realize the detrimental effects of such relationship dynamics.

Physical Violence

Participants experienced being slapped, grabbed, punched, pointed a gun at and stabbed in the hand. Participants had bruises, broken

bones, and hospitalization due to these incidents. Some of the instances happened once, while most of them happened several times.

Financial Abuse

Participants experienced financial abuse by being denied financial support for their children and housing. This led to hardship in bringing their children to school, buying their needs and inability to pay their rent, water and electric bills. In the same regard, the participants felt abused financially by being extorted, causing them to lose resources to buy things for themselves and their family of origin. Lastly, participants were also restricted access to income-generating activities like work, freelance, or business activities.

Sexual Abuse

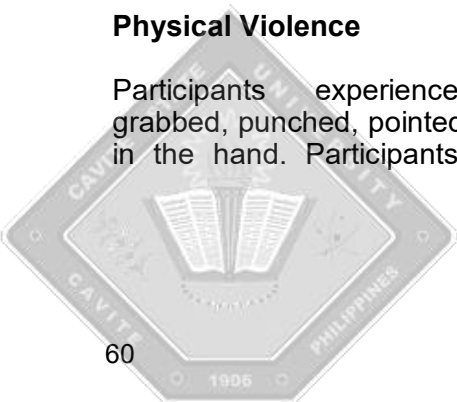
Participants experienced being coerced for sexual intercourse and performing sexual acts that they are uncomfortable with. A participant recounted only realizing the full extent of that impact of the trauma on her when she is already undergoing therapy.

Psychological Impact of the Trauma

This theme describes the psychological impact of IPV to the participants. It describes the emotional, social, mental, financial and spiritual repercussions of the abuse they experienced. This theme also examines the psychological reactions of the participants immediately after their separation from their previous partners.

Shattered Assumptions

The participants expressed changes in their beliefs about themselves and the people around them after being exposed to Intimate Partner Violence. Participants contrast their ideas of a loving relationship before and after their experience. Participants were hesitant to interact with the opposite gender following the relationship, with or without the intention of a romantic possibility. Most shared that they are



now hesitant to enter a new romantic relationship thinking that the same thing might happen again [Interview Excerpt 2].

Neglected Needs

Most of the participants expressed feelings of neglect over the fact that they are suffering in the relationship or in other areas of their life and they find that their partners are uncaring, unsupportive, or unreliable at that point in their life. They expected their partner to nurture them, protect them and take care of them. Instead, they were deprived of love [Interview Excerpt 3].

Diminished Self Worth

Participants expressed that their abusive partners restricted them from expressing themselves by silencing or ignoring their emotions and opinions. Most of the participants felt that their real identities were taken away from them either at the start of the relationship, or when the relationship turned abusive, because they were forced to act in the ways that would please their ex-partner rather than what they really want to do.

Sense of Betrayal

The respondents were vocal about the sense of betrayal that they felt. Most of the women believed that they gave their maximum contribution to the relationship but not only was it not reciprocated, their partner chose to hurt them instead. This sense of betrayal tends to be more extreme for the married couples or those living together, as well as those who became engaged. However, the experience of aspiring for a future with their partners and being betrayed was found common to all participants [Interview Excerpt 4].

Aside from this, participants also felt disoriented about what to do for their future now that their relationship is over. Having set routines and plans for the future, they are left betrayed by the dissolution of the relationship [Interview Excerpt 5].

Psychological Distress

Participants experienced mental health problems following their separation from their partners. Some described experiencing panic attacks, having suicidal ideation, and being diagnosed by a psychologist or a psychiatrist with a mental health disorder [Interview Excerpt 6-7].

From Trauma to Recovery

This theme describes the factors, behaviors, events, and people that helped develop posttraumatic growth. It describes the process that the participants went through to make sense of what happened to them and the actions they took to heal from their experiences. Aside from their personal contribution to their healing, this theme also discusses the events and resources that the participants needed from the people around them and their environment in order to progress in their recovery.

Mental Resolve

Mental resolve is the conscious decision of the participants to end the relationship, refuse reconciliation, and grow from what they experienced [Interview Excerpt 8].

Meaning Making and Cognitive Reconstruction

Participants try to make sense of what happened to them, hypothesizing why it happened to them, their shortcomings, their efforts to make the relationship work, their future plans, and what they possibly gained after the relationship. They create meaning from their experiences based on their new faith, insight from conversations, or by reading books. When participants gain insight from their experience, it helps with the acceptance of what happened and the courage to move forward [Interview Excerpt 9].

Industry

Activities that required the participants to be

productive are important factors that facilitated growth. These are activities where they spend time with other people.

Work

Working has many benefits to the participants. Primarily, it served as a distraction to not think about what happened to them. Unlike being in the house daily, where the place triggers memories of their relationship, working provides an activity that the participant should focus on. It provided a sense of accomplishment and purpose, making the participants realize that they are capable of doing something. It also served as a way to connect to other people who supported the participants by listening to them, giving advice and insight, and doing other activities with them. Lastly, work was very important for the single mother participants, because it was the means to provide for their child or children, in the absence of financial support from their partners [Interview Excerpt 10].

Hobbies or Recreational Activities

These are activities that the participants do without the intention of earning. However, like work, these activities provided distraction from ruminating about what happened. It also provided insight and an opportunity to connect with other people. Examples of this category are reading books, joining socio-civic organizations, committing in church activities, recording vlogs, etc.

Psychological Help

Consulting with a psychologist or a psychiatrist helped the participants deal with the trauma that they experienced. Most of them were not even aware that their experience was traumatic but because of its detrimental effects, they sought professional help. They started to process what happened to them, accept it, recognize their emotions, and manage the ramifications felt in their lives. Some were given medications while others were still undergoing psychotherapy

[Interview Excerpt 11].

Although several of the participants did not consult a professional, they still benefited from Psychology. They are either students majoring in Psychology, attended an event with a resource speaker discussing Psychology, or they have friends who work in the field of Psychology [Interview Excerpt 12].

Meeting After the Relationship

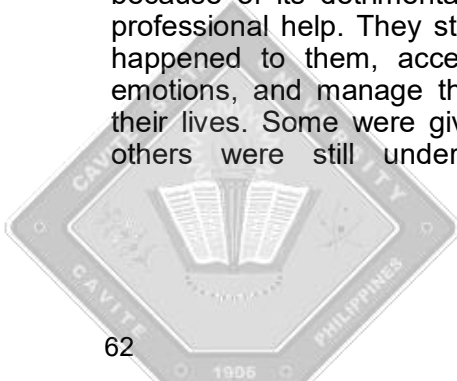
There are different positive effects when participants are able to meet with their partners after the relationship, whether intentionally or unplanned. First, having a conversation after the relationship provided an opportunity for an apology and to talk about what happened to them. They are also able to talk about their arrangement for their children, if they have one. Having an opportunity to talk after the relationship brings a sense of finality that the relationship is really over [Interview Excerpt 13].

It can also be observed that for some participants, this opportunity brings a sense of relief that they are already free from the person and the relationship. They recognize their growth especially when they see their partner after some time. It also reinforces the idea that they are already healed from the traumatic experience because they are no longer emotionally affected when they see their partner [Interview Excerpt 14-15].

However, one participant does not see the need to meet after the relationship. Some think it is unnecessary because they already healed on their own and they are content with their current relationship and they want to show respect to their current partner [Interview Excerpt 16].

Social Support

Participants highlighted the importance of social support after the separation. As most of them became isolated during the relationship, reconnecting with other people was refreshing



for them. It was also an opportunity to express themselves and be vulnerable about their trauma. Most of them gained insight from other people that helped them see their situation from a different perspective. It usually takes a while before participants are comfortable to disclose their experiences with other people, but when they do, it often has a great impact on their healing process. Some felt the most significant social support from their family, friends, church community, elders, or even the social media [Interview Excerpt 17].

Domains of Posttraumatic Growth Experienced in the Present Interpersonal Relationships

Wisdom about Future Romantic Relationships

Most of the participants, whether in a current romantic relationship or not, claimed to have learned a lot of lessons from their past relationship that can be applied to future ones. Participants learned to identify what they want and do not want in a relationship, to practice good communication, to express when they are uncomfortable, and to handle and resolve conflicts [Interview Excerpt 18].

Reconnecting with Other People

Because their previous partners were of the jealous-type, controlling and managing their relationships, they did not have the freedom to talk and connect with anyone they pleased. When the relationship was gone, they were liberated of the senseless burden to isolate themselves and make their romantic relationship the only relationship they have. Participants started reconnecting with their family and friends whom they stopped meeting regularly during the relationship. Though there is a sense of guilt, it is often a relief to be with their relationships to make up for the lost time. Most of the participants also received social support from reconnecting with their friends [Interview Excerpt 19].

Helping Others Through What They Experienced

Another theme that emerged under this category is the desire to help or inspire other people through what has happened to them. Participants felt greater compassion to other people who are going through a traumatic relationship after their experience. A majority of participants also agreed to participate because they are thinking that whoever will be able to read this study will benefit from their life story [Interview Excerpt 20].

Appreciation of Life

Participants recounted appreciating their life, work, relationships, and abilities more after their experience. Most of the participants expressed a sense that time, effort and resources will be wasted if they continue spending it in their traumatic relationship or in the memory of them. Afterwards, they started to allocate their energy and life into something more meaningful and rewarding [Interview Excerpt 21].

New Possibilities in Life

Since most of the participants felt regulated in many ways by their previous partners, being out of the relationship made the world a bigger place. It opened up a lot of opportunities for the participants. They are now able to pursue the hobbies they avoided in the past, express themselves, start a new job or a new career path, socialize, enroll in a school, travel, and many more [Interview Excerpt 22-23].

Personal Strength

At the onset of the separation, participants felt great emotional distress. However, as time passes, their emotions become transformed into strength. Participants recognize the experience as the cause of their maturity, compassion, wisdom and boldness to face difficulties in life. They also started to feel confident and secure in their personal life. Lastly, participants are now better able to take care of themselves through

self-care activities [Interview Excerpt 24].

Spiritual Strength

Most of the participants expressed having a richer spiritual experience after their traumatic relationship. Majority of the participants engaged in spiritual activities like going to church, reading the bible, spending time with the church community, having clear convictions of what is right or wrong, and a general sense of being closer to God. Participants find comfort in the idea that God sees their suffering and responds to their needs at that time [Interview Excerpt 25].

Remarkably, one participant shared that from atheism, she became more active in going to church and praying after her experience [Interview Excerpt 26].

DISCUSSION

One of the goals of this paper was to describe the Intimate Partner Violence experiences of Filipino women. According to the theory of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), on which the findings of this paper is explained, trauma constitutes any event powerful enough to shatter a person's assumption about other people and themselves. This event is also impactful enough to challenge a person's psychological resources and psychological survival. The need for studies about posttraumatic experiences related to interpersonal relationships is well recognized in the academic community (Rokach & Philibert-Lignières, 2015; Orzeck et al. 2009).

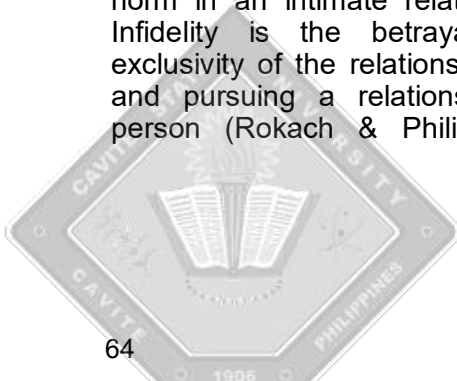
People are social beings that have a deep need to belong in an intimate relationship. This relationship is characterized by care, knowledge of the other person, interdependence, trust, commitment, and intimacy. The socially accepted norm in an intimate relationship is exclusivity. Infidelity is the betrayal of the expected exclusivity of the relationship through deception and pursuing a relationship with a different person (Rokach & Philibert-Lignières, 2015).

Couple therapists say that their most prevalent clients are infidelity cases. They describe that problems related to affairs are among the most complicated relationship problems to treat (Snyder et al. 2004). One reason found across the literature for the more adverse outcome is the sense of intentionality of the perpetrator to hurt the victim, thus shattering the assumptions of trust and care pretrauma (Reich et al. 2021). Many clinicians agree that infidelity results in symptoms characteristic of posttraumatic stress disorder.

Aside from this, the participants had an experience of having a controlling partner. It is found in the literature that one of the hallmarks of abuse is control (Hester, 2013). Coercive control is the repetitive attitude or behavior of a person in a relationship that seeks to control, restrict, and dictate the other person in order to maintain power or benefits (Cattaneo, 2008). It is the way in which a person keeps their partner under their influence, taking away their liberty. This loss of autonomy creates an unhealthy dependency of the victim to their partner. Most of the participants mourned the loss of their relationship, even if it turned out to be traumatic later on. There is a sense of longing, especially when the separation was recent, which made the participants think about reconciliation, but later decided not to. This is not an uncommon experience, because separation from a controlling partner whom a person already developed dependency on creates feelings of instability (Platt & Freyd, 2009).

Physical, Sexual and Financial Abuse

Physical violence has harmful consequences to the individual, the children, and the society. Aside from the obvious physical health risks, physical, sexual, and financial abuses have serious mental health implications as well. In a study that examined the difference of the effects of abuse by current partners and ex-partners (Theran et al. 2006), it was found that physical violence has a greater effect when the abuser is a current partner than an ex-partner. Due to the



nature of the abuse, a victim is able to seek help and healing once the relationship is already over.

Financial abuse, also sometimes called economic abuse, is a behavior or attitude that creates a barrier for another person to access proper financial resources, therefore threatening a person's self-sufficiency (Adams & Beeble, 2018). Participants of this study experienced being pressured to not take a job they wanted, withholding or being stringent with financial support given to them which is insufficient for their everyday needs, and being forced to buy material items for their partners. Individuals who experienced Intimate Partner Violence or domestic abuse experience financial abuse 99% of the time, but do not recognize it. Victims of financial abuse cite embarrassment as the most common hindrance for not seeking legal action or help from the people around them, or the fear of having no source of financial support (Conner, 2014). Once the victim is able to acquire resources through government programs or by being employed, they become empowered. It is one of the most common experiences among the participants, being employed gave them new purpose, meaning, and strength. It is concluded in a study about the survivors of financial abuse that practical help like improving government policies, deliberate campaign in the workforce for recruitment and employment, as well as legal protection for wives and children are needed to mitigate the effects of financial abuse (Pastmus et al. 2011). However, psychological studies for evidence-based interventions for victims are still lacking in the literature. Aside from the understanding that financial abuse does affect an individual's dependence on their abuser, no other claims or studies are done for this specific experience.

Lastly, sexual abuse is any act of coercion or violence related to sex and sexuality. It may include forcing their partner to have a sexual intercourse, or perform sexual acts that they are uncomfortable with. Sexual abuse may also include sexual taunts and insults, threats, and manipulation (Levy-Peck, ND). Usually, sexual

abuse co-occurs with other types of abuse in relationships. Experiencing sexual abuse affects one's physical and emotional health (Oram, 2019). It is found that sexual abuse has a greater effect when the abuser is already an ex-partner, rather than a current partner, alluding to the delayed response of the participants to the sexual abuse they experienced (Theran et al. 2006). This implies that the effects of the abuse may continue and exacerbate even if the relationship has already ended. Thus, understanding the process of posttraumatic growth from this population is important.

Several theories have been formulated to explain the relationship between trauma exposure, specifically interpersonal trauma, and shattered assumptions (Unthank, 2019). After experiencing trauma from abusive relationships, individuals develop dysfunctional posttraumatic conditions. It is also found out in the literature that these negative cognitive effects of trauma are correlated with higher symptoms of depression and PTSD (Dunmore et al. 2001). Without cognitive reconstruction, posttraumatic growth cannot occur.

Across the literature, studies about emotional neglect are mostly about parents and children. While it is understandable since children are a vulnerable population and they bring this experience to adulthood (Barlow & Schrader-MacMillan, 2009). However, it is also evident that this emotional abuse happens in Intimate Partner Violence too. Neglect is the feeling of isolation and abandonment. It is the intentional disregard to a person's physical, sexual, and psychological needs in order to maintain power in the relationship. Neglect is the ironic feeling of loneliness while in a romantic relationship. It creates beliefs of helplessness thus making it hard for the victims to seek help. Interestingly, literature says that neglect and isolation happens more commonly with males than with females (Karakurt & Silver, 2013). Having scarce studies of IPV in the male population, it is difficult to infer the difference of their experiences.

No matter the type of abuse received during the relationship, (physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, verbal and financial), all participants expressed a sense of loss of identity during their traumatic relationship. As seen with the findings of other researchers with battered Filipino women (Estrellado & Loh, 2016), being abused by their romantic partners decreases the self-esteem and self-respect of women to the point that they feel like they do not know themselves anymore. Participants mentioned losing their dreams, priorities, self respect, and even their hobbies. In addition to this, because most of the participants experienced their partners cheating, it caused self-doubt and questions about their worth. A sense of betrayal, which is felt in trauma from intimate relationships (Birrell & Freyd, 2006), was also expressed by the participants. As a boyfriend, fiancé, or a husband, the participants planned to spend their lives with their ex, but not only did it not happen, the relationship also often ended very badly. Aside from this, most of the participants considered their partners as their best friend, someone whom they are most vulnerable to. They also expected their partner to protect them, nurture them, and support them, which did not happen, and they received abuse in return. All of these contributed to the sense of betrayal they felt. This betrayal may also explain the participant's fear associated with the opposite gender, even if the relationship is platonic. Due to the sense of betrayal from their ex partner, it negatively affected their perception of other people (Deprince et al. 2009).

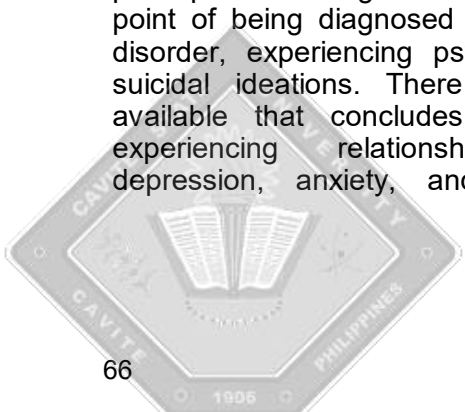
At the onset of the separation, participants felt a great deal of psychological and emotional distress. While liberating, the end of a traumatic relationship is not an easy experience. Individuals do not automatically grow psychologically. After the separation, all of the participants felt a great deal of distress, to the point of being diagnosed with a psychological disorder, experiencing psychosis, and having suicidal ideations. There is much literature available that concludes the correlation of experiencing relationship trauma and depression, anxiety, and even personality

disorders (Dye et al. 2020). Most participants expressed feeling depressed, anxious, guilty, confused, and irritable. Physical reactions are also evident as some experienced gastric problems, fatigue, loss of appetite and difficulty sleeping.

Another goal of this paper was to identify the factors that help a Filipino woman grow from their traumatic experiences, a construct known as posttraumatic growth. Analysis of the themes of the study is consistent with the model of Posttraumatic Growth Theory by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). At the onset of the event, individuals tend to ruminate about what happened, with usually automatic and intrusive thoughts. Eventually, when individuals choose to disclose their experience to other people and have a good experience with it, thus gaining social support, they will be able to be more intentional and reflexive in interpreting what happened to them. They will be able to adapt to this new insight and integrate it into their life, resulting in greater wisdom.

It is found across the dataset that the participant's mental resolve to end the relationship and to grow from the experience is an important factor that led to their growth. Participants decided that the relationship is over, deliberately took steps to disconnect from their ex-partners, and firmly decided that they will come out as a better person after this experience. A lot of the participants grieved the loss of their relationship at first, but after cementing their decision, they went uphill from there. A number of them had thoughts about going back to their ex-partners, but ultimately decided not to pursue that anymore. It is important to understand that the loss of the relationship caused instability and a feeling of loss of control (Snyder, 2004). Having a mental resolve is regaining control in their lives. Because posttraumatic growth is a long process (Frazier et al. 2002), having mental resolve prevents victims of IPV from relapsing or going back to the abusive relationship.

Understanding that one of the most devastating



effect of trauma is shattered assumptions, meaning making and cognitive reconstruction is a pre-requisite for growth (Uhnthank et al. 2019). Without processing their experience, victims of intimate partner violence will not achieve posttraumatic growth, highlighting the importance of mental health professionals to aid in this process. This is where the difference between interpersonal and non-personal trauma lies. Rumination, or the negative persistent thinking about the event that happened, its consequences, and the victim's role in the event, is often linked to higher symptoms of PTSD (Arditte Hall et al. 2019). However, a certain type of cognitive style is found to be helpful among the participants, confirming the framework of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). It is evident that finding meaning and purpose about what happened to the participants also contributed to their growth. Seeing their experience from a different perspective also helps them reconstruct their shattered assumptions about trust, love, care, boundaries, self-worth, and relationships (Kouvelis & Kangas, 2021). Punitive and condemning thinking is associated with rumination, but schema reconstruction is found to be helpful. When participants start to think about what they learn from their experiences and what they can do better in the future, posttraumatic growth starts to develop. The theme of their thoughts start to change, from being trapped to freedom, from being dependent to autonomy, from being insecure to being secure, from being helpless to being empowered. This shift started to happen to the participants through gaining insight from their conversations with other people and reading articles, or by having closure with their ex-partners, an opportunity to settle their misunderstandings. However, there are participants who cite that psychotherapy has been helpful for them in understanding, processing, and growing from their experience of Intimate Partner Violence, highlighting the importance of professional help for the victims.

Persistence in cognitive reconstruction plays an important role in facilitating growth. This is consistent with previous studies (Jirek, 2011),

which shows that there are different types of cognitive functioning at the onset of the trauma and at the later years, which are both contributing in the development of growth. When the trauma is recent, the cognitive focus is more on understanding what happened to them. Later on, the cognitive focus is more on seeing the benefits of what happened and positively reinterpreting the event. People develop a trauma narrative, that is, seeing their life from before and after the trauma, with the event as the turning point. Meeting or seeing their exes also further reinforces the new narrative, thus strengthening their psychological resources. This is consistent with the participants looking back to what happened to them and seeing it in a new perspective, how the experience gave way to strength, depth, and better life.

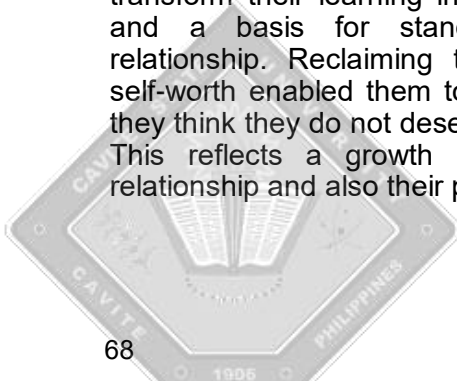
Participants experienced cognitive reconstruction after their traumatic relationships. They are cognitively challenged to reconcile what they believe and what they experience in reality (Wade et al. 2017). For example, participants shared that before the experience, they firmly believe that all people deserve a second chance, to be forgiven, understood and trusted again. However, when they experienced being cheated on repeatedly, they realized that not all people deserve a second chance, because they choose to hurt intentionally. As past literature explains (Ramos & Leal, 2013), growth is not an automatic result of experiencing a traumatic event but a result of cognitively processing what happened to them. This struggle with the new reality appears to be crucial in developing posttraumatic growth. It can be likened to a house built in the Pacific, sturdy and able to provide shelter. However, when a storm came, it collapsed and was devastated. The owner would have to rebuild the house, but now with the storm in mind, he or she will be able to incorporate that experience into the design of the new house. They will be able to choose storm-proof materials that will be able to withstand other storms to come. Similarly, dealing with the participant's breakdowns resulted in their breakthroughs in life.

helpful in this process of building psychological growth because another person's insight can provide new information or strengthen ideas that will be incorporated to the person's new schema (Jordan et al. 2016; Farber et al. 2009). However, as seen in the study of Marriott et al. (2015), people who experienced trauma from a close relationship tend to disclose later compared to those whose trauma is environmental, or from non-close relationship. Although difficult at first, a study (Birrel et al. 2006) showed that healing from trauma should not only be focused on reducing symptoms experienced but by increasing positive interpersonal experiences. Social support provides a sense of warmth, comfort, trust, and guidance which somewhat undo what they experienced in their traumatic relationships. Across the literature (Xie & Kim, 2022), evidence of the healing power through the help of others are very evident. This is observed to be true in all of the participants. They recalled their experiences of talking with family members, friends, coworkers, mentors, or a therapist as one of the points detrimental to their healing process. They felt understood and cared for when other people empathize with them. They also develop insight from their conversations that leads to reflection and meaning-making.

Themes of domains of PTG identified in this study can be categorized in all five of Tedeschi and Calhoun's categories (interpersonal relationships, appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal power and spiritual change); no new category was identified. Another observation is that there is growth that could be categorized to more than one domain of growth. For example, the most evident and the most common among all participants is their growth in interpersonal relationships. While many experienced fear associated with the opposite gender at the onset of separation, all of the participants learned to manage this reaction and transform their learning into healthy boundaries and a basis for standard for their next relationship. Reclaiming their self-esteem and self-worth enabled them to refuse the treatment they think they do not deserve from other people. This reflects a growth in their interpersonal relationship and also their personal power.

As mentioned previously, many participants disclosed experiencing depression and suicidal ideation. Growth in the domain of appreciation of life shows that individuals who evaluated their life as meaningless in the past, now have a renewed sense of passion and purpose. The experience of being at the rock bottom and slowly rising to recovery also inspires most of the participants to help other people move on from this experience. This is a display of growth in the domains of appreciation of life, personal power, and interpersonal relationships. For other participants, a closed door gives way to a new open door. When their restrictive and toxic relationship ends, they are able to identify what other things they want to pursue in life, which they have not seen before.

Personal power is a domain of growth that is very empowering to hear from the participants. They tell their story of recovery with so much pride and joy, especially when they describe how they chose and continued to choose to heal and grow from their experience. The mood at the start of the interview where they tell what happened in their relationship is usually very depressing, with some participants crying because they still feel the pain. As the interview progresses and especially towards the end where they share the things they think improved from themselves after their experience, the mood becomes victorious. They are proud to have experienced a traumatic relationship and fight their way to recovery. Most of them reclaimed their sense of self, they learned how to take care of themselves again, they felt beautiful again, they feel that they are making better choices now, and overall, they think that they are a better, stronger, and wiser person compared to who they were before. Lastly, spiritual change is very evident in the lives of the participants as well. Engaging in religious activities and practices gave participants a sense of hope that things will get better soon. It also gave them comfort to believe that Someone higher than them is orchestrating events to bring justice to the pain they felt. Lastly, religiosity is also found to be a consistent domain of PTG among trauma survivors (Schultz et al. 2010). One important factor of religion is that it aids in



the cognitive reconstruction of the victims and it also connects to the victims emotionally (Ronneberg et al. 2014). It offers an explanation or purpose to what happened, offers a promise of vindication and forgiveness, and it also alludes to the emotions of love, care, protection, strength, and comfort. Due to this, it is no doubt a protective factor for the participants.

The literature about the IPV experiences and posttraumatic growth is still very young, if not non-existent. One study states that gender-based violence is commonly experienced in the LGBTQIA+ community, and this has been the most studied phenomenon in this gender minority. However, their experiences after this phenomenon and how they develop posttraumatic growth is still largely unexplored (Sullivan et al. 2017). This study included individuals identifying as an LGBTQIA+ and during the data analysis, it was found that there are no significantly different themes on the IPV experiences and its psychological impact specific to this group. With this finding, it can be concluded that the framework of posttraumatic growth transcends gender and sexuality boundaries.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

A past traumatic relationship is highly transformative because it is a very emotional experience (Rokach & Vandervoort, 2007). Whatever the participants learned from that is not just an intellectual learning, but something that is highly personal (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2006). It can be seen that most of the participants' mental health was greatly affected because of their experience. A lot of them expressed suicidal ideation, confusion with their identity and life, difficulty forming new relationships, physical discomfort, and loss of motivation. One of the participants also disclosed experiencing psychosis at the onset of their break up. Several of the participants were

diagnosed with major depressive disorder as well. There is no doubt that mental health is greatly affected by this experience. Seeking psychological help is seen to be effective among the participants who had access to assessment, consultation, and psychotherapy.

Therefore, it is important for clinicians to understand the nature of traumatic relationships here in the Philippines, so that they will be better equipped to help their patients develop posttraumatic growth through therapy. Psychoeducation is very important because several participants expressed that at first, they did not understand what was happening to them, and only heard about the proper terms and understood their emotional and physical responses to trauma after consulting a psychologist. Psychoeducation provides clarity and is the first step to recovery. Next, psychologists should assess if client is experiencing depressive symptoms, especially suicidal ideation. It is important for patients to be taught about self-care as well, since a lot of the participants struggled to take care of themselves during the relationship and also after their separation. Clinicians should also promote meaning-making strategies, self-disclosure practices and activities that will make the patient feel industrious as these are found to promote posttraumatic growth to participants.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the study achieved its goals, it is not without limitations. First and foremost, all of the participants were female. Although according to the Violence Against Women (2017) report, one in four Filipino women are being abused, it is still important to understand if the same process happens with males. Next, the duration it took for the participants to say they recovered from the experience varies from participant to participant, some lasted for only a few months, while others took years to recover. It will be important for

future researchers to explore the factors related to this observation.

Lastly, another important limitation of the study is that the majority of the participants were identified as Born Again Christians. The Philippines, as a religious country, may contribute as to why the participants' relationship with a higher being is so central to their healing process, so it is recommended for future researchers to study this domain with a non-Christian sample or an equally representative sample of the religion of the population. It is also worth investigating if religiousness predicts posttraumatic growth. If posttraumatic growth is evident in religious people, it begs the question if spirituality is a domain of growth or a predictor of posttraumatic growth.

CONCLUSIONS

Intimate Partner Violence is a complex experience that impacts the person's self-concept, interpersonal relationships, finances, future plans, emotions and mental health. Even when the relationship is severed, the victims have to go through the long and tedious work of rebuilding themselves, their idea of a good relationship, their living situation, and their parenting. Although healing from this experience is individualized, this study gave a clearer understanding of this phenomenon which hopes to help individuals, communities, and clinicians.

Posttraumatic Growth is fostered primarily through reflecting on the event that happened to reconstruct schema, self-disclosure, and social support. After some time, although the experience remains to be distressing, growth in the areas of personal strength, interpersonal relationships, spirituality, new possibilities in life and greater appreciation of life are evident. While it is true that a traumatic relationship is a devastating experience, this paper is a testimony that human beings have extraordinary psychological strength to not just survive, but to transform their breakdowns into breakthroughs.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Interview excerpts are available at [https://](https://drive.google.com/file/d/16-RO4Ld9eR1RXyoPLxfQCoa6mAttrTl0/view?usp=drive_link)

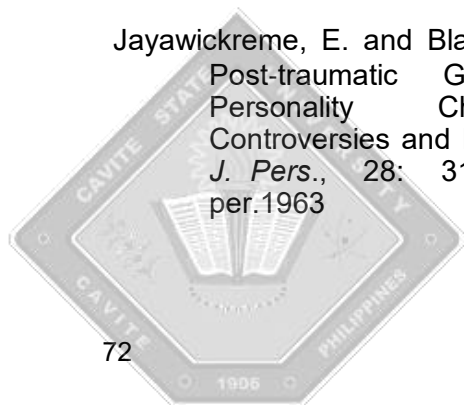
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