Experience of Domestic Violence Survivor Women in Searching Their Life Purpose and Self-Resilience

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Abstract

Victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) often experience several psychological disorders, such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression, driving them to a point where they lose their life purpose. Resilience implies the ability of victimized women to adapt to their stressful situations or recover by regaining the balance among their physiological, psychological, and social aspects of life. Those who attain self-resilience are called survivors—a phenomenon that has been scarcely investigated regarding the discovery of life purpose and self-resilience of women who are survivors of IPV in Central Java. Thus, this study aims to gain insight into the experience of IPV survivors in discovering their life purpose and self-resilience. We conducted qualitative research on six IPV survivors and determined four themes—self-reliance and bravery marking the beginning of life recovery, support from the closest person who provides strength, coping strategies used for the survival, and learning from experience to reinforce future goals. This study recommends mental health nurses to act as counselors for IPV survivors to support them in their recovery phase to enhance the mental health of patients.

Keywords: IPV, women.

Received date: 25 August 2018  Accept date: 30 September 2018


Introduction

To date, gender issues remain an extensively discussed topic, especially concerning the equality of both genders, regarding either their social standings or the status of women. Conceptually, although the Indonesian society has accepted the idea of emancipation, the implementation has not been as ideal as speculated. The follow-up agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes on the existence of women, resulting in the establishment of global goals along with its indicators, which are projected to be implemented and supervised during 2015-2030. Furthermore, one of the goals of SDGs is gender equality and women’s and girls’ rights in pursuit of eliminating human rights violations.1 According to the 2004 Constitutions Act number 23 states that violence against women is an act which causes physical, sexual, and psychological harm, including threatening, coercive, or deprivation of liberty, and applies not only to public domains but also their private lives.

Regrettably, only some women attempt to free themselves from the adversity that occurs because of intimate partner violence (IPV) by seeking meaning of their life. A study reported that those who found their meaning of life choose to pursue their purpose of life, positively affecting other individuals, society, and surrounding environment.2 Broadly, the purpose of life signifies the meaning of life comprising both pleasant and unpleasant experiences and happy or sad circumstances.3 Another study reported that the process of discovering the meaning of life commences with self-acceptance, changing attitude, and eventually determining the purpose of life to recover from unpleasant events.4

Resilience is defined as the ability of IPV survivors to determine their purpose in life and harness the ability to recover from the stress they experienced. A study reported that resilience is a situation of enduring the
adaptation of stress or events with the person exhibiting the capability to recover. Resilience is characterized by the ability to regain a balance among physiological, psychological, and social aspects and display the tendency never to quit striving on in their quest to face difficulties. Those who are resilient and display the capability of survival are called the survivors.

Previously, a research was conducted on the life experience and self-resilience of women who were victims of IPV. Using the descriptive phenomenology research method to depict the resilience experience, the study identified the following three themes: change toward resilience; change in experience to overcome stress; and change in a positive direction. Likewise, another study investigated IPV survivors displaying resilience and enrolled participants who had already overcome difficulties posed by IPV and had a new life; the study identified the following four themes: trust, insight, limited, and independence.

The novelty of this research lies in the fact that it aims to determine the process of discovering the purpose of life and resilience among IPV survivors, which, to the best of our knowledge, has never been investigated earlier. In addition, this study aims to observe factors contributing to the resilience of IPV survivors comprehensively.

**Materials and methods**

**Study design**

In this study, we used the qualitative and descriptive phenomenology approach. We selected qualitative method for the in-depth analysis of IPV survivors’ experience. Hence, this study used the descriptive or transcendent phenomenology comprising four stages: bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing.

**Participants’ enrollment**

We used the purposive sampling technique based on the orientation of research objectives and in accordance with the inclusion criteria of pre-determined participants. In addition, we obtained participants’ data from Division Team of LRC-KJHAM. We enrolled six participants who had undergone a self-esteem component screening based on Coopersmith (1993), which has been revised and translated by Hari in 2008 and comprises 40 questions to elucidate positive changes. The self-esteem screening revealed that >80% of these six participants displayed high self-esteem. In addition, the criteria-based selection of participants tailored to the objectives of this study were as follows: (a) aged 20-40 years; (b) married women; (c) profiled as a victim of IPV ±2 years ago; (d) willing to inform personal IPV-related experience; and (e) experienced positive changes in the emotional status and adjustments in their daily life.

**Data collection**

We performed the data collection at the Legal Aid Institution of LRC-KJHAM (Semarang, Indonesia), at participants’ house or a cafe. After completing the data collection for each participant, the interview results were converted to transcripts and proceeded for data analysis. The process of collecting data through in-depth interviews was conducted from December 28, 2016, to January 01, 2017. Furthermore, the report was compiled from early January till the end of March 2017. Please specify whether any approval from any authority, such as Institutional Review Board or Ethics Committee, was required before commencing this study.

**Data analysis**

In this study, we used Colaizzi's approach for the data analysis (1) to create the verbatim version of participants' interview results and re-read participants' descriptions based on the phenomenon to gain perceptions of their experience and elucidate the experience; (2) extract crucial statements directly associated with the phenomenon researched; (3) formulate the definition of remarkable results in pursuit of determining hidden meanings; (4) categorize the significance in theme groups and validate consistency between the findings and the story of participants without disregarding unfit data; (5) integrate findings with a comprehensive description of the phenomenon researched, describe keywords including text segments as a topic, comparing consistent theme topics, and relate themes of consistent significance that seemingly form themes; (6) validate findings by returning to participants to ask general descriptions, which are then compared with their personal experience; and (7)
incorporate the changes that participants stated in the final description of the phenomenon.

**Ethical considerations**

In this study, participants comprised women who were IPV survivors and considered as the vulnerable group; hence, it was necessary to protect their rights. As the ethical considerations of the research were a matter of concern for researchers, participants were protected considering the aspects of autonomy, anonymity, confidentiality, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence. Of note, this study does not pose life-threatening dangers to participants. We used participants’ code in each research report, except for the letter of consent that used participants’ initial name. In addition, the Anonymity Principle was fulfilled by using code—P1 for the first participant, P2 for the second participant, and so on until the sixth participant—rather participants' names or initials. The Principle of Confidentiality was adhered by storing the data collected in a safe place and was only accessible to researchers. Besides, data were analyzed and stored in a safe place. All researchers held unique passwords only known to them. Moreover, the recording data were stored in the Gmail Dropbox program and will be erased after 5 years, in accordance with Permenkes number 269 / MENKES / PER /III / 2008 about Medical Record chapter IV article 8 paragraph 2. Next, Justice implies that all participants received equal treatment and rights to participate in the study. In this study, we strived to fulfill the principle of beneficence by avoiding possible questions that could cause discomfort to participants and stimulate emotional outbreaks. Notably, researchers did not force participants to express details they did not wish to divulge.

**Results**

**Participants’ characteristics**

In this study, we enrolled six participants (all females; age range: 36-48 years). Regarding the marital status, three were widows, two were married and still living with their husband (perpetrators), and one had decided to remarry. The educational status of participants varied from elementary school to high school graduates. On average, participants had experienced IPV for >10 years. The leading form of IPV reported was psychic violence, followed by economic violence.

**Themes**

This study identified four themes associated with the experience of life-purpose discovery and self-resilience of women, from the moment they were victims till they became an IPV survivor. The themes identified in this study were self-reliance and bravery marking the beginning of life recovery, the support of the closest person who provides strength, coping strategies used for the survival, and learning from the experience to reinforce future goals.

**Discussion**

Self-reliance and bravery marking the beginning of life recovery

IPV is considered a life event that triggers stress, trauma, depression, and low self-esteem among victims. A study explained that individuals with low self-esteem often assume that life is meaningless and possess no control over their life and often experience no life satisfaction. Women begin gaining independence as they experience behavioral changes. Another study applied the transtheoretical model, in which victims deliberately change their behavior in pursuit of “freedom”. Behavioral changes comprise the following five stages: (1) precontemplation where victims have no intention to change; (2) contemplation, thinking about change without taking any action to actually attain the situation; (3) preparation, seriously considering the change that is going to happen; (4) action, active involvement by victims in a change, for instance, having the intention and courage; and (5) maintenance, when one maintains the change for, at least, 6 months. In the final phase, a victim leaves her husband (the perpetrator) with no intention to return to her once significant other half.

In this study, P1-P4 left their spouses to ensure their physical safety and protect their children because they wanted to gain their freedom and recover from the violence that they endured in their lives. The proclamation of gaining freedom is supported by a previous study, in which authors stated that victims...
would proceed to a period of self-recovery to improve their self-awareness, life goals, and identity as a survivor.

The self-recovery process is essential in finding the purpose of life. Prior research stated that the process of recovery, by restarting their life from scratch, rebuilding, and reconstructing life after a violent relationship cannot disregard the power of bravery within them.\textsuperscript{16} Reportedly, the self-recovery process of IPV undergoes the following four phases: binding, enduring, disengaging, and recovering.\textsuperscript{12} Binding is the very first moment when violence occurs. Enduring is building a tolerance toward violence to maintain a cordial household relationship. Disengaging is the moment a victim begins to experience an emotional shift between loyalty toward her partner, herself, and her survival; in addition, the victim begins to identify herself as a woman who is harassed and hurt. Finally, recovering is the initial recovery period after a woman separates from her partner until she regains balance in her life. Furthermore, good adaptability is one of the primary characteristics of self-resilience. Reportedly, resilience is a term often used to describe one's ability to maintain a balanced state while facing challenges and is used to describe the ability to revitalize from adversity after a trauma.\textsuperscript{17}

**Support of the closest person who provides strength**

Support from the closest person constitutes part of an effective support system that provides strength and protection when one is experiencing stress. The process of support selection comprises an assessment in which participants believe the support provider will provide them with the support that fulfills their expectations. Other factors desired include privacy, stigmatization, the severity of violence, and prerequisites to ending the relationship with their husbands to receive assistance.\textsuperscript{18}

The source of support is further classified into formal support and informal support. The formal support is gained from community organizations (e.g., Integrated Service Center/PPT and police) and private organizations (e.g., medical professionals, nurses, and psychologists). Conversely, the informal support can be obtained from family, close friends, and spiritual leaders.\textsuperscript{19} The closest person's support relies on family and close friends as the primary source of the informal support, whereas community supports are, for example, PPT LRC-KJHAM or Sekartaji Community, the Rosary Prayer Program (KDR), and Family Welfare Development (PKK).

Reportedly, the family constitutes the primary support system in the recovery process.\textsuperscript{20} In this study, P1–P5 stated that their family provided them with the support and comfort that they needed at the time. A study reported that should there be any community member who experienced a similar event, they will provide each other with the strength to recover from their prior experience;\textsuperscript{21} this behavior is demonstrated by IPV survivors who joined the Sekartaji community where they shared and supported each other.

**Coping strategies used for the survival**

Coping strategies are behaviors that help an individual to handle the situation with the intention of solving the problem. A study reported that coping is more dynamic rather than static.\textsuperscript{22} Lazarus and Folkman\textsuperscript{23} categorized the coping strategy into two types: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. While the emotion-focused coping is the ability to handle stressful situations to overcome the suffering and manage emotions, the problem-focused coping attempts to solve problems by reducing stress factors.\textsuperscript{24}

When determining the coping strategies for women, it also reflects the prevailing cultural norms and the status of women in the community, given their weak position, especially in regions that hold the patriarchal culture. In the patriarchal culture, women tend to use emotion-focused coping strategies compared with the other.\textsuperscript{23} The examples of emotion-focused coping strategies include using religion, avoiding husbands, and seeking emotional support from families. In this study, participants P3, P5, and P6 used emotion-focused coping strategies in pursuit of spiritual support by performing religious rituals such as prayer, invocation, thanking the God, participating in religious activities such as the Rosary Prayer Activities (KDR), or recitation. A study explained that positive spiritual coping offers the strength that helps individuals to survive in dire problematic situations and helps them to find a meaning of life as a form of solace so
that victims can manage their accumulated emotions.\textsuperscript{25} In addition, a defensive ego-oriented coping occurs unconsciously that is often used in repressive manners. The use of defensive ego-oriented coping strategy is supported in a previous study,\textsuperscript{26} which reported that victims used the defensive-ego mechanism to repress unpleasant experiences from the past by participating in positive activities.

Another emotional control method used by participants is using catharsis techniques. A study reported that catharsis is the purification or cleansing of emotions associated with sadness, fear, or tension if it is to be associated with the psychological world.\textsuperscript{27} In addition, catharsis is defined as a technique used to relieve tension and anxiety by consciously suppressing one's feelings. In this study, most participants consciously suppressed their feeling to ease the tension they experienced by praying as a form of emotional “cleansing,” counseling, and engaging in hobbies as desired by participants. This finding is in accordance with previous research,\textsuperscript{28} which described that the situation of fear and tension could be changed by distraction, expressing emotions to others, and expressing emotions creatively like engaging in art or hobbies. In this study, P3, P5, and P6 were more likely to depend on their religious practices to control their emotions, whereas P2 and P6 used hobbies such as reading books and painting.

Based on a prior study,\textsuperscript{29} the characteristics of participants with resilience are (1) individuals who hold positive aspects such as demonstrable skills, high social life, and positive self-concept; (2) family support that remains tightly tied up to date; and (3) external support systems besides the family. Apparently, all participants were tough individuals who displayed optimistic characteristic, were emotionally stable, and had a more meaningful view of life. Besides, the family is a good source of support, both materialistic and emotional wise. Furthermore, supports can be drawn not only from the family but also from social life as shown in each community.

**Learning from experience to reinforce future goals**

A study reported victims as survivors who held hope for the future.\textsuperscript{30} Such motivation helps survivors to attain what they desire in a quest to achieve their life goals. In addition, these ideals provide confidence to move forward and prudently plan strategies to attain their goals. Moreover, these survivors can find other alternatives in attaining the purpose of their life when faced with an obstacle in attaining a goal.\textsuperscript{30} The purpose in life can be attained in several ways as follows: (1) possess positive energy (from within oneself) and (2) having a way or other alternatives to attain life goals that help them to become a survivor for a long time. In this study, most participants stated that they wanted to be an independent woman and not depends on others (husband or ex-husband).

Reportedly, the strength attribute of survivors and virtues positively affect individuals to develop and feel happy.\textsuperscript{14} The characteristics of virtue are as follows: (1) cognitive strength that requires learning and use of one's knowledge; (2) emotional strength that comprises the use of motivation to attain the purpose of life; (3) interpersonal forces that encourage relationships and cooperation with others; (4) support of others that contributes one's ability to positively affect others; (5) the ability to provide protection against extreme behavior; and (6) the spiritual connections that encourage survivors to facilitate a meaning within themselves. Perhaps, when an IPV victim receives support from other IPV survivors, she will more likely express a healthy coping behavior, facilitating the improvement in their current understanding; in addition, it reflects the assimilation between survivors’ significance and the victim and appreciates it as life experience.\textsuperscript{14}

**Conclusions**

This study identifies four themes to support women who are survivors of IPV. The first theme is self-reliance and bravery that marks the beginning of life recovery and describes freedom as the initial response to gain independence from domestic violence. The second theme is the support of the closest person who gives strength. The third theme is the coping strategy used for the survival. Finally, the fourth theme is learning from the experience to reinforce future goals, helping survivors to regain their sense of control and self-defense in their personal lives through women empowerment activities. Overall,
participants display virtues by helping others who share the same fate to strengthen and transform their understanding as a survivor.

Acknowledgments

Researchers would like to express sincere gratitude and acknowledge PITTA Research Grants 2017 of Directorate of Research and Community Service (DRPM) team of Universitas Indonesia who support the International Publications Grants in the quest to increase the number of international publications as proof of institution’s research quality.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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