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Adult Daughters of Battered Women: Recovery and Posttraumatic Growth Following Childhood Adversity

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This article details the recovery process, including posttraumatic growth, for 15 adult daughters of battered women. Using qualitative inquiry, participants' recovery was found to involve a cognitive restructuring of childhood misconceptions of themselves, their parents, and the trauma itself. Key to this transformation process, and consequently allowing for posttraumatic growth, was an interwoven process of meaning-making including two specific elements of understanding: the cause and effect of domestic violence and the significance of suffering from such exposure in childhood. Distancing from their parents, education on domestic violence, accessing therapeutic/support services, and having a spiritual connection contributed to enhanced insight and wisdom. Implications include providing professionals with conceptual insights regarding how to identify and support adult daughters' lifelong recovery and growth.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Professionals working with adult survivors of childhood exposure to domestic violence should facilitate opportunities to explore how such individuals make meaning of their experiences.

- Consistent with a strengths-based resiliency approach, professionals should look for ways to help clients recognize their abilities to learn and grow from negative experiences.

Traumatic experiences incapacitate one's normal mechanisms for coping and self-protection; therefore, one often resorts to extraordinary measures in order to survive physically and psychologically (Wade, 1997). As highlighted in our previous study on adult daughters of battered women (Anderson & Danis, 2006), along with the entire range of debilitating effects of trauma, most individuals display a stunning capacity for survival and perseverance. Previously we documented resistance strategies to childhood exposure to domestic violence and showed how children use a variety of mental and behavioral tactics to prevent, withstand, stop, or oppose their mothers' and their own subjugation (Anderson & Danis). This current study set out to build on our prior inquiry through further analyzing what aspects of adult daughters' lived experiences were selected out and given meaning in regard to adult recovery from childhood exposure to domestic violence. In doing so, we learned how these women alter their adult self-narratives to fit their childhood events into new understandings of themselves, their parents, and their suffering. Important to the recovery process is using one's hard-earned wisdom to make life choices that ultimately transform the powerlessness experienced in childhood.

When traumatic events occur during childhood, they are more likely to be a part of one's identity, serving as a developmental basis for perceiving, thinking, and reacting to life circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). However, because the self is complex and constructed, individuals have choice in their identity formation; thus, adults are not destined by their childhood conceptions of self and other (Docherty & McColl, 2003). Trauma can disrupt individuals' views of themselves and relationships with others, as well as their core

assumptions; yet, according to constructivist self-development theory (CSDT) facing these disruptions may also promote expanded perspectives, the development of additional personal and social resources, and new ways of coping (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). CSDT posits that inevitable changes occur in regard to identity, relationships, and worldview as one attempts to construe meaning in response to a traumatic event; hence, individuals' identities are shaped by the sense they make of their own life stories (Docherty & McColl).

Risk and Protective Factors for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Approximately 15 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year, with 7 million living in families with severe partner violence (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006). Witnessing violent acts and enduring a family environment characterized by fear, control, and powerlessness often negatively affects children's adaptive abilities, emotional well-being, social functioning, and physical health (Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001; Kilpatrick, Litt, & Williams, 1997; Mullender et al., 2002). Long-term impact of exposure to domestic violence is often studied through retrospective research designs (Maker, Kemmelmeier, & Peterson, 1998). The majority of studies targeting childhood exposure involve sampling from college student populations. Research findings suggest that higher levels of depression and stress symptoms occur in individuals exposed to family violence compared to nonexposed men and women (Forstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985; Straus, 1992). In addition, studies have demonstrated that exposed individuals show poorer social adjustment and increased relationship difficulties, including interpersonal violence, compared to nonexposed persons (Cantrell, MacIntyre, Sharkey, & Thompson, 1995; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). The results of these studies demonstrate the obstacles to achieving successful intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning in adulthood.

Identifying risk factors and their consequences is extremely important; however, in doing so, such research obscures how individuals interpret their survival and the strengths that led to that survival. In trauma recovery, resilience and impairment are not necessarily opposites, but instead, are different aspects of the overall experience

of coping and adjustment. Humphreys (2001) collected life histories from 10 resilient (i.e., exhibiting "productive lives and successful relationships," p. 245) adult daughters of battered women (ranging in age from 20 to 40 years old). This study addressed major life turning points (i.e., transitions in one's life) and adaptations (i.e., coping with major transitions) in the lives of these resilient women. During childhood, coping included being vigilant, not blaming themselves for the abuse, expressing their anger to their parents about the violence, and seeking social support. In adulthood, adaptations included persevering, being optimistic, uncovering information about the past (e.g., asking their parents why they stayed together), and seeking out opportunities to heal themselves (e.g., counseling). Humphreys' exploratory study helps us to better understand resilience in the face of childhood adversity; yet, more information is needed to advance theory and to develop conceptual insights regarding what promotes continued recovery and growth in adulthood.

Recent studies do reveal that some individuals can develop healthy and stable personalities despite enduring highly stressful environments (Linley & Joseph, 2004), including childhood exposure to domestic violence (Anderson & Danis, 2006; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Humphreys, 2001). Our prior inquiry (Anderson & Danis) and Humphreys' appear to be the only studies (a literature search of PsychINFO and *Social Work Abstracts* databases did not reveal any other studies) to address resilience in particular, and recovery in general, for adult daughters of battered women. The authors' previous study showed how adult daughters turn their childhood pain into an adult commitment of breaking the abuse cycle and giving back to others. However, we needed to analyze further what happens in adulthood to promote this process.

Posttraumatic Growth in the Aftermath of Trauma

In the aftermath of stressful or traumatic life experiences (i.e., the trauma has ended or the person is no longer in the harmful environment), many people report personal growth in the midst of their struggles to heal (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998). These positive changes are often referred to as "posttraumatic" growth and highlight the human capacity for transformation in even the most ominous circumstances. "*Transformation* is change, change that involves being strengthened, rather than destroyed, by trauma" (Bussey & Wise, 2007, p. 7, emphasis in original). Areas strengthened as a result of posttraumatic growth include: intimacy in one's interpersonal relationships, the ability and desire to help or protect self and others, spirituality, and resilience to future stressors due to a foundation of past coping and survival skills (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Roche & Wood, 2005).

Posttraumatic growth includes a process in which individuals attempt to find meaning from their encounters with life's tragedies. As Frankl (1984), existential psychotherapist and Holocaust survivor, aptly states, "Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning" (p. 23). Evidence varies as to whether or how posttraumatic growth is related to severity of trauma as the perceived impact appears more significant to growth than the trauma's exact nature (Helgeson et al., 2006). Posttraumatic growth (e.g., finding meaning and renewal in the aftermath of trauma) is a complementary but distinct concept in relation to the process of resilience (i.e., accessing internal and external resources during the trauma) and may account for Humphreys' (2001) participants continued growth in adulthood.

Humphreys' findings posit that because these women were resilient as children, this resiliency served as the foundation for continued hardiness in their adult lives. We also considered this to be the case in our sample; yet, we also questioned if our participants' positive functioning may have resulted more from leaving an abusive environment and attempting to make sense of their suffering rather than the extension of childhood protective strategies into adulthood.

Drawing upon conceptual insights from studies conducted with related trauma populations (i.e., female survivors of childhood sexual abuse, women who suffered domestic violence, and female sexual assault victims), aspects of posttraumatic growth are briefly described to provide a context in which to better understand how one may develop new understandings of life's meaning and purpose after such injurious and debilitating life events (Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2006; Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001). One key to the transformation process includes the ability of the survivor of violence to step back and detach from events and the environment that characterized the trauma experience (Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun, 1998). Such disengagement allows the opportunity for rumination on one's thoughts, emotions, and beliefs from a safe distance and provides the path for examination of the past. Lev-Wiesel and Amir (2003) note that breaking attachment to a violent perpetrator may be of utmost value to this process. From this new vantage point one can begin the process of deconstructing old schemas and worldviews on the nature of families, relationships, accountability, and other often previously unchallenged ideas about life that were part and parcel of the abuse environment.

Integrating one's reactions to and cognitions about the past with the new schemas that emerge from this rumination process allow for both an acceptance (rather than avoidance) of traumatic events and for an informed outlook on oneself and the future (Cadell, Regehr, & Hemsworth, 2003; Cobb et al., 2006). The growth experienced in this renewal process may then inform individuals' decision making; perception of possibilities; and appreciation for life, self-efficacy, and the value of choice. There is no magic formula, as one must go through the cognitive and affective processing of adverse experiences to get to the other side and reap the hard-won benefits of reconstructing a self-narrative of strength, resiliency, and agency.

Method

Research Design and Questions

This study builds on our prior work (Anderson & Danis, 2006) regarding childhood protective strategies for daughters of battered women by addressing their recovery in adulthood. Because the intent of this study was to discover *how* one continues to recover and grow in adulthood, additional analysis using the grounded theory method was particularly suited, as its purpose is to identify complex and hidden psychosocial processes (Glaser, 2001). The study's two research questions included:

1. How do adult daughters perceive their recovery from childhood exposure to domestic violence?
2. What growth, if any, do they perceive as a result of their struggles to overcome their childhood adversity?

Participants

After final approval by a university internal review board, participants were recruited through local newspaper advertisements. Initial purposive sampling criteria included females who met the following criteria: (a) were age 21 or older; (b) did not reside in their parents' homes; (c)

had experienced (during childhood) their mothers being battered by intimate male partners; and (d) were able to differentiate between exposure to their mothers' abuse versus any violence directed personally at them. Subsequent theoretical sampling was based on the qualitative criteria (Oktay, 2004) of saturation of the code categories, relevance to emerging themes, and added variation of perspective (e.g., diversity in duration and onset of exposure to domestic violence). Based on the sampling criteria, of the 35 inquiries received, 15 became research participants. (Note: As our inquiry was ongoing, 3 more individuals were added to the original sample [N = 12] in the study by Anderson and Danis [2006] using the same sampling criteria.)

Participants were women ranging in age from 22 to 64 years old (M = 39, SD = 11). The majority were European American (n = 11), 1 was Hispanic, 1 was Asian, 1 was African American, and 1 was Native American. Of the 15 participants, 12 were heterosexual, 2 self-identified as lesbians, and 1 self-identified as a bisexual. Educationally, 6 had high school degrees and 9 participants had completed a bachelor's and/or master's degrees.

The majority of study participants (n = 13) were exposed to the batterer's violence for 13 or more years, with 10 out of 15 reporting that the violence was present throughout their childhoods. The types of violence reported by all participants included physical and emotional abuse, and 10 reported that the batterer used weapons including guns, knives, or automobiles. Batterers included fathers (n = 14) and one stepfather.

Procedure

Although a semistructured interview of open-ended questions was used, participants determined the emphasis they would place on different aspects of their stories and they were given the freedom to describe the meaning they had given to their own experiences. Each interview began by the researchers asking participants to pick a pseudonym and to share their childhood experiences of exposure to their mothers' battering (i.e., the threat or actual use of physical, sexual, or verbal abuse). We asked additional questions regarding how their thoughts and feelings changed, if any, over time in regard to themselves, their parents, and the abuse itself. We also asked participants about any personal qualities and social conditions that impacted their recovery. Prompts to this question included informal and formal support systems along with skills, ideas, turning points, and a sense of self-regard, control, and purpose in life. Each in-depth interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. Member (participant) checking included a 30-minute follow-up interview after participants had received a summary of the findings to gain their insights regarding the final analysis. At the conclusion of the second interview, we gave each participant a $20 gift certificate to a national department store.

Data Analysis

We conducted qualitative data analysis using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 2001) on the transcripts. Two researchers coded and organized data using the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS/ti™ (Drisko, 2004). Through coding, data were then grouped into final categories representing key psychosocial issues and patterns related to recovery and posttraumatic growth. We analyzed the data by comparing categories with one another, so that relevant themes addressing the research questions could emerge.

Trustworthiness

To insure methodological rigor, trustworthiness (Oktay, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the data involved member (participant) checking to establish that the reconstructions were credible and that the findings were faithful to participants' experiences. Participants were provided written and oral summaries of their responses and given opportunities for correction, verification, and clarification through follow-up letters, telephone contacts, and interviews. For example, upon receiving their transcribed interviews, researchers told participants, "As you read through your transcript, you may want to make notes that would further clarify what was said or address an area that was not originally discussed." And in the follow-up interview, participants were asked, "Are there any changes or additional comments that you would like to discuss in regard to the study's findings?" Additionally, researchers conducted ongoing peer debriefing to review their audit trail regarding the research process.

Findings

As the daughters matured into adulthood they continued to look for ways to better understand and heal from their adverse childhoods. Their desire to act on that knowledge was associated with a process of "making sense" of their childhood exposure to domestic violence. In adulthood, recovery for the participants involved an interwoven process of meaning making, including two specific elements of understanding: the cause and effect of domestic violence and the significance of childhood exposure to it. The former element involved acknowledging, understanding, and eventually accepting their childhood adversity. There is much about domestic violence that is paradoxical and thus difficult to understand. Therefore, this process engaged questions such as, "Why would my father harm somebody he loved?", "How come my mother did not stop him?", or "Why did my parents stay together?" Key to addressing these questions (and thus making sense of their exposure to domestic violence) involved distancing from their parents, education, consciousness raising on the nature and dynamics of domestic violence, and accessing therapeutic/support services. This process of meaning making led to a transformation of childhood views of their parents (mothers from victims to resisters and fathers from inhuman to imperfect humans) and of themselves. This process ultimately led to a more profound understanding of human limitations (e.g., people often simply are doing the best they can with the resources they have) and an improved evaluation of self (e.g., stronger).

The latter element of finding understanding involved answering the "why" of being exposed to domestic violence. This process involved the meaning and purpose of the suffering they experienced. It engaged the question of "Why did I experience a childhood marked by violence?" Key to addressing this existential question involved a spiritual connection, particularly, a relationship to God or a transcendent force (e.g., something outside of themselves). This process of meaning making led to a transformation of views regarding their suffering (from questioning it to finding meaning in their struggles). This led to a better appreciation of life and a greater life purpose (e.g., breaking the cycle of violence).

Understanding the Cause and Effect of Domestic Violence

Distancing from parents. Spatial and temporal distance from one's parents was vital to confront the reality of the past from a safe, detached standpoint. As one participant, Mary (age 47) stated, "There definitely is hope. And especially once you get out of that house-

hold. Just because you lived in it doesn't mean you have to continue it." All participants reported the need to emotionally separate from "the drama" of one or both of their parents. Four discussed having a positive emotional relationship with their mothers and 3 with their fathers. Six participants physically left home prior to age 17 and 9 participants discussed physical separation due to the death of a parent (*n* = 4), geographic location (*n* = 2), or parents choosing to limit contact once their adult daughters (*n* = 4) set boundaries (e.g., no drinking, no abuse) with them.

An important component included acknowledging the realities of their exposure to violence during childhood and to embrace the fact that what happened to them could not be changed. The simple, yet complex act of coming to accept the reality of the past and of the childhood they were given was a necessary first step toward transformation:

> I think that in order to cope you have to know what you are coping with. And like for so long I knew I was just angry. I don't think that until you can really admit there's a problem and recognize that this is not normal and that you don't have to preserve appearances and until you remember those things you can't do anything about it. I think I can better cope now especially because I'm feeling the feelings I didn't want to feel and yeah, it hurts, and yeah, it sucks, but it'll get better but not until you actually address the problem. (Joanna, age 22)

Education on domestic violence. Learning about the nature and dynamics of intimate partner violence was also reported by all participants as being an important step in their recovery. For them the unhealthy messages received during childhood directly and via their exposure to violence needed to be unlearned and replaced by new information about families and relationships:

> And that's why I say if I would have gotten educated back then [early adulthood], I think I could have saved myself quite a few years in my adult life that I wouldn't feel were wasted...I was fighting a losing battle, and I didn't see it. I never seen it coming, and I should have. (Trish, age 37)

Accessing therapeutic/support services. Nine participants shared that they sought professional therapy/counseling services and 4 sought support groups that became for them the bridge to the process of facing and dealing with the past:

> Counseling, I think, is very, very important. I think that without knowledge and without understanding what happened, people tend to repeat the same pattern over and over and I've seen that so many times. So, I would think one of my biggest things I would say to people is seek help and that's probably my biggest thing because really people don't know. I mean, they just don't know and they don't understand, and sometimes it takes somebody wiser than you to gain that understanding. (Melinda, age 35)

Transforming view of parents. Eleven participants reported that as children they placed the blame on their mothers for not leaving, for "causing" the abuse, for not somehow stopping it from happening. Two adult daughters continue to struggle with anger (but not blame) toward their mothers who remain involved in cycles of substance abuse and violent relationships. All participants, through adult

eyes, now see clearly the essential powerlessness shared by them and their mothers, often rooted in the era they lived in, and the isolation that preserves abuse, poverty, lack of support, and even the confines of religious belief. A new perspective on the past helped these adult daughters reject cultural messages about women's complicity in their oppression as they came to realize the true dynamics of abuse and that neither they, nor their mothers—also powerless—were responsible:

> She didn't have any skills that were marketable outside of the home, and we of course were trapped in poverty, and I know some of the things Dad said were, "If you leave I'm going to kill you." She was just in an impossible situation. When I grew older, I was able to understand what kind of situation she had been in, and what she had been through. (Diane, age 27)

By holding the perpetrator accountable for the abusive events that were witnessed during childhood, there is the simultaneous realization that neither the mothers nor the participants themselves, by virtue of being children, were empowered to stop the violence. This understanding is crucial not only to placing appropriate blame but also of freeing themselves from undeserved guilt. This concept of the common experience of powerlessness shared by mothers and children living with violence in the family emerged as a significant facet of recovery and growth in adulthood:

> I realized I was carrying around this big load of guilt. And my guilt was that I never tried to help my mother. I mean there were moments when I thought of going downstairs because I couldn't stand what I was hearing. I was terrified. I thought she was going to be killed. And I didn't go; I was afraid to go. I now know that if I had gone, there was nothing I could have done. (Sarah, age 64)

Often the mothers, who during childhood were viewed by participants as to blame for allowing the abuse, are seen through adult eyes as strong active resisters of the abuse, surviving it day after day. Knowledge of their mothers' survival skills were thought of as gifts by many (*n* = 9):

> Because even through the absolute worst you could ever go through in your life, for her [mother] to survive it and still have her spirit, not lose herself, and there were many times I felt like I was losing myself, I just couldn't believe it was happening...seeing her do what she did was amazing. (Moberly, age 32)

Although the process of realizing the powerlessness of their mothers as well as themselves could be viewed as a painful, demoralizing one, it represented a step toward accepting the realities of the human condition and the idea that people often simply struggle to make the best of the lives they are given:

> I try to put it in perspective. I mean, I hated my parents for so long, but I realized that they were doing the best they could with the tools they had. They were ignorant of any outside help. They didn't have any idea that other people could help them. (Maggie, age 45)

Participants spoke of coming to understand their parents' shortcomings, as well as their own, and of the importance of accepting these hard facts as a significant step in their recovery. Several (*n* = 10)

described a new understanding of their fathers and of the empathy they have as adults:

> I kind of have empathy for him, and that's why I decided to restart this relationship with him, on meeting him where he's at….I don't excuse his behavior at all, but I have empathy. I can look at him from an outside point of view for a minute, and go, "God, given his upbringing and his struggle, he's lucky to get his pants on every day and move through the world." (Casey, age 40)

Transforming view of self. For these adult children, once they realized their own powerlessness to change the events of their childhood, they claimed their power as adults. Participants reported the perspective that adults have the power to make choices, for better or worse, while children must rely on these adults to make good choices for them. Although this cannot be altered in terms of repairing the past, it also means that, as adults, individuals are now in charge of their own choices and the consequences:

> I've worked my way to a place where I'm happy and proud that I pulled through and made a better life. My mom and dad are always going to be the driving force, somehow, in my life, but they're not going to overtake my life. They're not going to take my life away from me. I'm going to be better than that. (Maggie, age 45)

Participants' present context was found to be a place where power, choice, and agency had replaced childhood powerlessness and distortion. Their decision to take charge of their own lives, the drive toward self-actualization and the grasping of personal power served as the porthole out of hopelessness for the adult daughters in this study:

> Because there is a positive side to all of this, even when you have lost everything, there is a "you" left inside, and you can take that "you" and bring it forth. You can take that little seed that's left in you and you can grow it. And it will happen. It's all up to you, what you want, and what you choose. (Suria, age 35)

Understanding the "Why" of Suffering

Spiritual connection. All participants discussed how—at some point in their adult lives—depending upon a transcendent force, something beyond them, helped them to rise above their suffering. God (or a Higher Power or Spirit) was viewed as a source of strength, companionship, love, and hope. Additionally, a Higher Power fostered a sense of meaning, purpose, and value in life; all heightened areas for these women in the aftermath of their trauma:

> I know that my purpose is to do whatever brings the glory of God, and I feel like that is using my experiences that I've been through, whether it is through the domestic violence experiences that I've been through or just the experiences I've had with my dad in general. To just relate those to people so that they can realize that there is hope and I have God as my hope, and so that is where my purpose comes from. (Joanna, age 22)

For 13 of the participants, spirituality continues to be vital in their lives. Nine of those participants discussed how their spiritual connection was not related to faith-based settings, while the remaining 4

discussed how their spirituality was a blend of organized religion and informal experiences:

> I've always felt like there was something there that cared. In periods when I'm not practicing any form of spirituality, I don't do well. There has to be something there, organized or individual. I won't say that it saved my life, but it certainly got me through some of the tougher moments. That's right up there with the strengths that I have. Somehow I was just born with this innate feeling that something higher than me loved me, and if you were going to pick anything that was different between me and my siblings, I would pick that one and that was a gift. (Mary P., age 51)

Transforming view of suffering. Many would find ironic the idea of acquiring priceless value in a childhood marked by violence, but it was the most striking element of the transformation process presented here. These women reported finding out that after the hurt had been dealt with, what was left underneath was insight and special knowledge. For example, one participant, Moberly, age 32, stated, "How I make sense of it now is I wouldn't take it back for the world because it made me the person that I am now, and I think that everything happens for a reason."

Commitment to breaking the cycle replaced the inability to see beyond it. These adult daughters turned their struggles with adversity into a means of action to help, rather than hurt, others. Just as there is a purpose for life, there is a purpose for suffering, and for these participants it included a mission to give back to others. The strengths they forged, such as courage and compassion, in regard to their adversity were thought to be of benefit to others who might be struggling to persevere. During the research process, participants discussed how it was helpful for them to talk about what had happened to them, but what was more important was sharing their experiences in an attempt to help others. They hoped that something good could come of the harm they endured; thus, they were motivated to reach out and offer understanding, faith, and support to others who have been similarly abused. This points to the essence of their conversion of pain to compassion, rooted in their process of gaining understanding and resolution. The subsequent adult daughter excerpt is an example of participants' commitment and responsibility for breaking the cycle of violence:

> We don't have degrees, but I've been to the school of hard knocks, as my mom would say. And I can talk more knowledgably about the pain and the hurt and witnessing those things than people who've read about it in books. So that's what I have to contribute, and that's what I would like to be able to do. I'd like to either give talks or whatever that I could to help people. I think that I have a lot to offer. (Maggie, age 45)

Discussion

Recognition of distorted thinking and misunderstandings during childhood about the nature of the perpetrator's violence was a crucial step toward the creation of a life free of violence for participants. These women reported feelings of anger toward their mothers, belief in the lies told by their fathers, and the well-documented sense of guilt and self-blame so often experienced by children exposed to violence and the abuse of close others. Having attained a new level of consciousness about family violence, these adult daughters look back with new eyes

on what seemed true at the time; they then turn these new eyes toward a better future.

For the participants in this study, although trapped in an abusive environment as a child, the journey away from the cycle of violence was underscored by the power of choice and personal agency for transforming pain into wisdom, strength, and service. In essence, they learned that everyone endures pain, albeit in different doses, and to be fully human is to encompass all life experiences including the ones that hurt, sadden, and dishearten. In doing so, one becomes more whole and thus more able to transform suffering into gains that can benefit self and others.

Implications for Practice

This qualitative study aimed to elicit adult daughters' perceptions of what helped them to recover from childhood exposure to domestic violence. Despite the highly negative consequences such exposure can produce, the findings suggest that an adult's struggle to heal can, in some ways, also lead to a positive transformation. This study's results are consistent with posttraumatic growth literature regarding how individuals may create a perception of benefits that allows them to transcend the consequences of their adverse life circumstances (Ai & Park, 2005; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Yet, the presence of growth for these women did not necessarily mean they escaped negative consequences (e.g., depression, anxiety, trust issues, intimate partner violence); however, in coping with the losses and in rebuilding their lives it was deeply transformative in ways they reported as positive and valued. Enhanced knowledge of posttraumatic growth in such adults can provide a model for survivors and practitioners seeking signposts on the journey toward healing. Thus, further research is necessary in this emerging area in order to enhance the ability of helping professionals to facilitate posttraumatic growth in clients who are suffering in the aftermath of childhood exposure to domestic violence.

The human capacity for making meaning out of negative events is a strong force (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). It is in the re-evaluation, modification, or rebuilding of one's general assumptions about, and view of, adverse experiences that posttraumatic growth may be more readily addressed in the clinical setting. Helping professionals often discuss the dynamics of abusive intimate relationships (e.g., power and control) with survivors providing them with important knowledge on the causes and effects of violence; yet, it does not necessarily address or resolve the "why" of suffering for such individuals who are struggling to find meaning. After the hurt is dealt with, what may remain is insight and special knowledge that many who are fortunate enough to not experience family violence may not have the benefit of. If and when the client is ready, practitioners can find ways to support this process guided by the client's self-determination and individuality. Thus, those survivors who are interested in addressing the "why" of their suffering may be assisted to draw upon their intuition, wisdom, and, if applicable, a spiritual connection.

The goal of the helping process *should not* be for practitioners to impose alternative interpretations onto clients' life stories, including ones of posttraumatic growth (Docherty & McColl, 2003). The clinician must be careful to not minimize victimization and its often devastating consequences as a person is not better off, for instance, because during childhood she was exposed to domestic violence. Rather, some individuals may choose to redefine themselves by their struggles to prevail despite their victimization (Norman, 2000). In these cases, the practitioner may aid the survivor to recreate a narrative that in-

cludes positive outcomes from one's struggle to overcome the trauma, but not from any loss or changes that may have occurred as a result of it (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). It is a natural impulse for helpers to want to sort, categorize, label, and weave disjointed or disconnected themes into an organized whole that moves clients' accounts into a progressive trajectory toward health. Consequently, helpers need to prevent their own agendas from interfering when listening and supporting clients' stories of suffering. For some clients, reformulating their life narratives may include any gains received from their struggles to overcome their trauma. In the case of such individuals, the following questions may assist in discovering and acknowledging affirmative changes:

- Looking back, what, if anything, have you learned about yourself from your experience of being exposed to violence against your mother?
- In what way have these lessons, if any, impacted your own decisions and beliefs as an adult?
- What, if anything, sustains you? What keeps you going in troubling times?
- What, if any, are the lessons learned from enduring suffering in regard to positive changes in yourself, relationships with others, and the beyond (e.g., a Higher Self, a Higher Power or God, nature, humanity, or the universe)?
- In what way, if any, does your suffering provide you with a greater life purpose (e.g., breaking the cycle of violence, wanting to make a difference for others)?

Limitations

This exploratory study was based on a small sample size with limited ethnic and racial diversity and included the possibility of selection bias with regard to decision to participate in the study. The purposive sample for this pilot study came from and around a small Midwestern city. It is possible that the experiences of adult children may be shaped differently by the inherent differences between rural and urban settings. Finally, data collected through in-depth interviews rely on the self-reported memories of persons who have experienced trauma. It is not uncommon for persons who have experienced trauma to minimize their experiences as a way of coping (Enoch & Buchbinder, 2005).

Conclusion

This study provides provisional insights on the affirmative changes adult daughters make despite enduring childhood adversity. The intent is not to deny the real trauma of childhood exposure to domestic violence; however, helping individuals find meaning and recreate their life stories to restore hope and possibility does refute the myth that persons who endure such hardships are incapacitated for life or are unable to achieve their potential.

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