

Transcending Adversity: A Narrative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative research explored the character strengths of an individual who could thrive and succeed in the aspects of marriage, motherhood and family relations, studies, and work-related endeavors amid adversity. This study was anchored on a narrative approach, where qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview. Directed approach content analysis revealed five major virtues based on the character strengths and virtues identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004). Wisdom, courage, humanity, temperance, and transcendence helped the participant handle hardships. The specific character strengths are 1) perspective in handling finances, 2) perseverance amidst multiple roles, 3) kindness as a source of nurturing behavior, 4) love while playing various roles in the family, 5) self-regulation in managing finances, 6) spirituality as the source of faith, 7) meaning, and purpose, 8) gratitude in the presence of peripheral support, and 9) hope on her ability to affect the future. The study presents experiential proof that transition points and their simultaneous effects on personal, family, school, and work relationships do not inherently deprive a mother's ability to overcome challenges, especially with the presence of character strengths. Implications for positive psychology and positive institutions are also discussed.

Keywords

character strengths and virtues, marriage and motherhood, positive psychology, transcending adversity, work and family

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1. Introduction

The family is one of the “positive institutions” that gear individuals to become better citizens with a sense of responsibility, discipline, humanitarianism, politeness, temperance, patience, and value system (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Despite some vagueness on its boundary, the family's notion as the basic unit of a society composed of people connected by blood or emotion has thrived. Regardless of marital or civil status, it is believed that family members, particularly the spouse or the husband and wife, play a vital role in maintaining harmony and honing the family members' future, as per the functionalist perspective. Moreover, it is a tradition for many married couples, regardless of religious affiliation, to be together and help each other during the best and worst times. When people are reared in positive institutions, positive values are likely to develop, which bring positive societal implications.

Despite some uncontrollable and unexpected cases, not all couples fruitfully raise and maintain a family that shows interpersonal harmony, successful descendants, stable financial resources, and a happy household. In positively functioning families, circumstances like these may be transcended, given that either of the partners goes the extra mile to meet their partner's limitations (Cundiff, 2012).

Moreover, many self-help books and articles promise success and happiness while juggling different roles, especially among women. Tips on how to be a good partner, wife, and parent, and even how to be an effective leader, had proliferated, targeting busy women and mothers in the family. Despite these resources, there seems to be limited attention given to character strengths that generate success and happiness, particularly in maintaining accord with all family members, raising successful children, managing the household, and thriving in a career.

Furthermore, a mother, as locally and idiomatically described in the Philippines as “*ilaw ng tahanan*” [the light of the household], has evolved roles. Considering the progressing egalitarian nature of partners within families, it is not surprising to see mothers playing multiple roles simultaneously. Engaging and finding meaning while facing simultaneous challenges at home, family matters, and the occupational and societal realm may no longer be surprising. Despite this, it is worth knowing that literature and narratives on mothers' tribulations and strengths anchored on virtues and character strengths remain scant.

The development of personal distress has been frequently linked with predisposing and precipitating factors and the lack of mental, emotional, behavioral, and volitional capacity to cope with stress (Rashid & Niemiec, 2014). An evolutionary perspective supports this by emphasizing the role of nature in programming humans to think, feel, and respond negatively or evasively when dealing with setbacks and challenges. It is not surprising that clinical and counseling fields predominantly revolved around correcting dysfunction and the adverse effects of stress among individuals and families.



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Investigations on positive families also remained little because scholarly attention primarily focused on family dysfunctions (Kirszman, 2002). Despite this, the emergence of positive psychology offered a new perspective on dealing with individual and collective negativities (Park et al., 2004). Instead of alleviating negative symptoms, the field has developed a reliable classification, definition, and measurement of characteristics that buffer humans from adverse effects of pressures and maintain buoyancy amidst undesirable life situations.

Character strengths were conceptualized under positive psychology, which studies strengths that enable individuals and communities to flourish, thrive, and achieve well-being and purpose regardless of external and internal demands (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified 24 character strengths classified into six virtues. These character strengths are pervasive attributes valued in their own right and not automatically connected to noticeable outcomes. In this sense, some people exemplify these strengths, while others may possess these traits in a less obvious manner. Likewise, these character strengths do not shrink others; instead, they inspire those who observe their manifestation.

The six organizing virtues of the 24 character strengths are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Wisdom pertains to gaining and using knowledge and includes creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective. Someone with these character strengths displays novel ideas, loves to explore, thinks critically, and possesses sound insight. The second is courage, which fuels motivation despite opposition. It covers bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest. A person with these character strengths can assert himself under challenging situations, is persistent and determined, has integrity, and is truthful, energetic, and enthusiastic. The third virtue is humanity, which embodies caring for others and is composed of love, kindness, and social intelligence. A person with these character strengths establishes close relationships with others and is compassionate and socially adaptable. Furthermore, justice for building balanced social relationships revolves around teamwork, fairness, and leadership. Such character strengths are found in a person who can work with a team effectively, beholds justice as significant, and is effective in facilitating group tasks (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The fifth virtue, the temperance that protects an individual from excess, involves the strengths of forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation. Someone with such character strengths can tolerate one's shortcomings, be unassuming, be cautious in decision-making, and manage one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Last, the virtue of transcendence builds links with a bigger universe and deep meaning and carries an appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality. Anyone with these character strengths is attuned to exceptional examples, thankful for positive experiences, has a positive outlook toward the future, loves to have fun by making others laugh, and acknowledges one's purpose and existence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The presence and use of character strengths have been linked to enhanced work satisfaction, occupational engagement, a sense of purpose, self-efficacy and self-esteem, goal realization, positive emotions, emotional strength, and lower perceived pressure (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley et al., 2010; Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Park et al., 2004; Proctor et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2011). Its application aids better problem adjustment by reinterpreting and reframing, thus enhancing perspective, improving self-efficacy, and minimizing the focus on one's limitations. It promotes psychological flexibility, helps individuals manage relational changes, and balances social interactions. Evidence also shows that those conscious of their character strengths at a young age develop better self-confidence in adulthood due to cumulative advantage (Judge & Hurst, 2008).

1.1 Rationale of the Study

The optimistic benefits of positive psychology have been recognized in different settings and backgrounds. However, little attention was given to exploring women's narratives, particularly wives and mothers, who have transcended life's challenges, raised and maintained a positive institution (family), and successfully carried out multiple roles. Understanding the context of these narratives anchored on the perspective of character strengths also received little attention. This study is conducted to understand how character strengths help a particular Filipino mother successfully maneuver through adversity.

1.2 Purpose of the Research

This research explored the virtues behind a mother's triumph amidst adversities. The study should identify the following to meet this aim: the participant's transition point, the challenges she encountered after the major life changes, and the character strengths that sustained the participant in the face of tribulations.

2. Methodology

This section discusses the research design, the research participant, the instrument used, the procedures, and the data analysis.

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative design to explore and understand the social phenomenon being investigated from the participant's viewpoint (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon explored in this study revolved around the mother's ordeal and the character strengths that helped her transcend life's adversities. Specifically, the study anchored on the narrative approach, which helped the researcher explore the problem, identify the context, and recognize the issues and lessons learned by the participant from her life experience. Narrative inquiries allow the participants to describe their experiences that may clarify their identity and how they see themselves (Creswell, 2013). Narratives commonly highlight turning points or specific challenges (Denzin, 1989).

2.4 Research Procedure

The researcher began with research conceptualization, followed by preparing guide questions. The researcher followed the Process Interview Model (PIM) by Dundon and Ryan (2010) in data gathering. The PIM embodied four stages, such as (a) retrieval or the building of rapport, securing confidentiality and giving informed consent; (b) respect or confidence zone that enclosed the participant's agreement to partake in the study; (c) reconciliation or strike zone that opened up for deeper conversation and disclosure and (d) reinforcement stage, which communicated gratitude and recognition of participant's narrative. The researcher used an audio recorder to capture the whole narrative. The researcher transcribed, read, reread, and familiarized with the data. Analysis followed through using pre-conceived codes and categories anchored on the list of character strengths. The researcher also validated qualitative data before coming up with the research report.

2.5 Data Analysis

To identify and understand the character strengths that sustained the participant in facing adversities, the researcher used qualitative content analysis, particularly the directed approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this approach, the qualitative data were subjected to structured analysis, where a pre-existing theory or research framed the coding, categorizing, and analyzing. In this study, the model of 24 specific character strengths organized into six general virtues, such as wisdom, courage, humanity, transcendence, justice, and moderation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), provided the analytical structure.

2.6 Ethical Consideration

Before starting this study, the researcher secured consent from the participant. The nature and purpose of the research were thoroughly explained, along with the research's confidentiality.

3. Results

The qualitative analysis of the narrative revealed the participant's transition point (3.1), challenges encountered (3.2), and coping strategies, which eventually paved the way for the identification of the participant's character strengths (3.3).

3.1 Stroke and Paralysis of Husband: The Wife's Major Life Adversity

Before the transition point, the participant was 37 years old and married for eight years to a 43-year-old military person in the Metropolitan for soldierly schooling. She was one of the top school heads in a government school in their province and was pursuing her doctorate. She had three children, aged eight, six, and two years old. The participant narrated that she did not know that she was two months pregnant with her fourth child when she learned about her husband's condition. Her husband, who had been away for several months, suffered from a thrombotic stroke, a condition that ensues when a blood clot develops in the artery that brings blood to the brain (Mayo Clinic, n.d.). Upon knowing the news, she immediately flew to the Metro

and left her three children in the province under the care of a trusted domestic helper. The illness also led to the paralysis of the right arm and leg of the participant's husband.

The participant described the stroke and paralysis of her husband as her transition point and major life challenge. From having major but manageable roles in the province as a mother of three children, a supportive wife of a husband far from home, a conscientious doctorate student, and a school head, the participant had to face the role of caregiver to her husband. She also had to take care of her health and monitor her pregnancy.

3.2 The Challenges of Playing Multiple Roles

The significant life change that happened to the participant marked the transition point that brought many changes to her life. The participant's most challenging experience after the paralysis of her husband comprised the simultaneous demands of having to play multiple roles, especially when they got home after a few months of stay in the hospital. She had to be a wife who needed to care for the paralyzed husband, a mother and father to growing children and a newly born child, a school manager, and a doctorate student. She needed to be the provider and the nurturer of all family members. The multiple roles resulted in multiple trials regarding financial, familial, time, and occupational concerns. Her difficulties revolved around her husband's medical expenses and physical therapy, baby supplies, children's schooling, hectic and demanding work schedule, doctorate studies, and care and maintenance of her sick husband, sick mother, and aunt.

3.3 The Character Strengths Behind Effective Coping

The content analysis revealed the character strengths that helped the participant survive and thrive on the challenges. The findings show that the participant's character strengths fall into five categories, specifically the virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, temperance, and transcendence. Table 1 summarizes the themes, exemplars, sub-themes, and the corresponding description.

Table 1 Generated themes on the character strengths behind effective coping

Major Theme (Virtues)	Responses	Sub-Theme (Characters Strengths)	Description of Theme
Wisdom	The more trials I encounter, the more I become stronger. I'm just enjoying life. In my 60 years of existence, I have seen that challenges are normal and can happen anytime. Despite that, we should be able to handle it. I don't get sad when I have problems. It's normal to experience trials in life.	Perspective on handling problems.	This theme shows the use of mental facility, particularly obtaining and using knowledge to value a righteous life.



Table 1 cont.

Courage	I told him (my husband) that I could let go of my doctorate studies for my children's welfare in school. I got challenged when he said I should finish what I had started. I shouldn't have enrolled if I couldn't just complete it. That's the reason why I persevered. Then, I became the school's officer-in-charge. I wanted to prove that I was doing my best at work and didn't lose motivation. I kept going. I didn't suffer much because I knew I had to juggle my roles, especially at work. I proved to them I could do it, I switched roles at home, and as my children fell asleep, I started planning for tomorrow.	Perseverance in work, studies, and tasks at home.	This theme involves using willpower to attain goals amidst external or internal opposition.
Humanity	I cared for him by clothing him, bathing him and throwing his stool and urine because he couldn't get up and get around. I experienced all of these. Then I also had to care for my sick mother and provide for her medical expenses. I carried the role of being a daughter, wife of a person with a disability, head of the school, and a mother of four children who happened to be good-looking and bright.	Love as a mother, wife, and provider.	
Temperance	I learned to be economical in handling my finances. I needed to allocate a budget for main priorities like water and electric bills, the helper's salary, milk, and medical expenses. I also prioritized our food for every day. My earnings then were just enough to meet our daily basic needs.	Self-regulation in managing finances	This theme pertains to characters that keep people away from excess and temptation.

One of the global themes from the participant's narrative was wisdom, which specifically embodied the participant's perspective on handling problems.

The participant viewed difficulties not as threats that must be avoided but as typical challenges that must be faced as they strengthened her character.

The perspective of normalizing life's problems helped her cope with the trials. Regarding coping with pressures from multiple roles at work, school, and tasks at home, the second theme pointed to courage, which mainly shows her perseverance. Instead of letting go of her doctorate studies to lighten her load, her spouse encouraged her to pursue her academic endeavor and endure the consequences of juggling multiple roles simultaneously. The participant's determination also rewarded her professionally, as she became the officer-in-charge of her workplace. Furthermore, the added work responsibilities motivated her to do her best instead of giving up and feeling stressed. Her awareness and acceptance of the consequences of her choices helped her face her responsibilities at home and her workplace.

Moreover, the third theme, humanity, mirrored the participant's character strengths, like kindness as a caregiver and nurturer of the whole family, her children, her spouse, and even her sick mother. She elaborated on her caregiving experiences while acknowledging the roles of being a daughter, wife of a disabled spouse, school manager, and loving mother of four children. She also showed her love as a mother, wife, and provider by providing for her children's needs. Specifically, because she was also a busy career person, she ensured her children had the materials and financial resources for their school requirements. She loved her children by keeping them and her spouse her top priority.

Temperance was the fourth theme in the participant's narrative. It covered self-regulation, which helped the participant in coping with financial stress. The participant became more practical in financial management and only prioritized necessities and fees for house expenses such as food, water, and electric bills, helper's fees, and medical expenses. Her earnings as a government employee then were just enough for the family's daily needs. With a virtue of temperance and a character strength like self-regulation, the participant lived within her means and could limit herself from having unnecessary expenses. The last theme was transcendence, which embodied the character strengths like spirituality, gratitude, and hope.

Despite the challenges that happened, the participant was able to find meaning and purpose through character strength and spirituality. She showed spirituality through prayers and faith in a higher being to guide and inspire her not to give up. Spirituality also helped her acknowledge the meaning and importance of life itself and recognize that things happen not by chance but by purpose. She also exhibited gratitude to others who helped her along the way and God, who became her oasis of strength amid difficulties. Last, the character strength and hope also fueled the participant to look at things in a positive light. Knowing that life was difficult did not discourage her. Instead, her hopes made her believe in her capacity to make a change and influence the future. Spirituality, gratitude, and hope brought essence to the participant's life.

4. Discussion

The study's general findings substantiate the impact of character strengths in boosting the participant's facility to transcend major life challenges and maintain a positive institution

Primarily, the findings regarding using perspective (under the virtue of wisdom) supported the notion that reinterpreting and reframing perception may foster effective emotional regulation (Rashid & Niemiec, 2014; Wood et al., 2011). It nurtures an open mind to see the bigger picture in a particular situation. Likewise, given the participant's perseverance in executing multiple roles at home, work, and studies, the result was consistent with the claims of Littman-Ovadia and Steger (2010), who believed that perseverance fuels goal achievement. Interestingly, the findings indicate that perseverance may be linked with the effective execution of multiple roles, such as being a mother, wife, caregiver, leader, and student, all at the same time. On the other hand, the participant's kind and loving character fit the earlier findings of Rashid and Niemiec (2014) that character strengths have beneficial effects in managing social relations and balancing social roles. The findings suggest that the virtue of humanity may sustain a person to care for others without feelings of exhaustion continually.

Moreover, the result concurs well with the notion of Peterson and Seligman (2004) that self-regulation protects a person from excess, as the participant managed her limited financial resources by controlling impractical impulses while prioritizing the immediate needs of family and important expenses. The findings also validate the role of spirituality under the virtue of transcendence in finding meaning and purpose amid difficulties (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In this study, meaning and purpose may be achieved by constant connection with a higher being. Likewise, the result is in complete agreement with Park et al. (2004) concerning the effect of gratitude on buffering distress. Instead of focusing on her limitation, the participant banked on outside resources for assistance. It thus increased her self-efficacy and improved her affective domain. Lastly, the presence of hope, as evidenced by looking at things positively, a sense of agency and pathways, and believing in oneself to surpass trials, supported the concept of transcendence that further brought deep meaning and satisfaction to the participant's existence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This research explored the virtues that fueled a mother's strength during significant life challenges by identifying her transition point, the trials she encountered after the major life change, and the character strengths that helped her withstand and surpass adversity.

The analysis provides empirical evidence showing that going through transition points or major life changes and experiencing their demanding and simultaneous effects on personal, family, education, and work relations may not automatically rob a mother's efficacy to surpass obstacles. It may likely happen when virtues and character strengths emerge and are used, especially in times of need.

The study suggests that possessing and applying character strengths and virtues may buffer the strain and pressure of simultaneously playing multiple roles and responsibilities.

Dealing with difficulties may be made easier by an open mind and perspective. Having to be a mother, wife, caregiver, student, and leader and gaining success in all these fields may be brought about by perseverance despite the opposition.

Moreover, kindness and love may be an oasis of vigor in caring for family members, particularly a paralyzed spouse and growing children. The findings also point to the essence of self-regulation in successfully managing financial resources. In addition, the evidence in this study implies that character strengths like spirituality, gratitude, and hope play a vital role in resiliency and helping a person to cope effectively with challenges.

This study's findings show that virtues and character strengths may be protective against emotionally, physically, socially, and financially debilitating circumstances. The study points to the idea that the creation and sustenance of a positive institution, particularly the family, may be executed by a mother who possesses the virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, temperance, and transcendence. This study may have practical implications for Positive Psychology and creating a positive institution, particularly in linking the strengths of perspective, perseverance, kindness, love, self-regulation, spirituality, gratitude, and hope to familial, occupational, educational, and social success.

This research only explored the virtues and values behind a Filipino mother's success regarding personal, marriage, family, educational, and career affairs. In this manner, the study has considerable limitations regarding its application to a broader population. Given the study's narrative and qualitative stance, it is improper to generalize and draw conclusions on association and causal relationships. Likewise, because the study only focused on the character strengths that sustained the participant, it is suggested to consider exploring the strengths present before, during, and after a major life change. It is to see comparisons and validate whether turning points play a vital role in developing character strengths. Replicating the study with other types of individuals may be necessary.

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