Posttraumatic relationship experiences in women in South India

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Abstract: Marriage is a socially binding intimate relationship between two individuals which is expected to be stable and enduring. In many cases, there can be severe difficulties questioning the quality of one's married life such as IPV or other kinds of abuse or exploitation which could lead to a divorce. Although divorce legally dissolves the relationship, studies suggest that the stress caused by a traumatic relationship may not end after terminating the relationship. The resemblance of these symptoms to PTSD led to the proposed diagnosis of PTRS. In this study, seven participants who have been divorced due to domestic violence for at least a year were identified and interviewed regarding their past and present life situations. The emergent themes in the data pointed to several factors that may influence one's married life, the decision of divorce and current life situations which can affect the amount of stress an individual might face concerning their past traumatic relationship. The factors influencing stress experienced during a traumatic marriage included involvement and support from one's family and in-laws, nature, and cause of abuse, stress-related to children, social support and the very decision to get a divorce. The process of overcoming fear, mistrust, and grief, social and family support, child custody, and related legal processes were factors that affected stress related to the process of divorce. The grief related to child custody, ability to rationalize the decision, career, remarriage and children's future were some factors that influenced the stress these individuals experienced currently in their life.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Posttraumatic Relationship Syndrome or PTRS is a new term explaining the long-term anxiety symptoms seen in some survivors of domestic violence where spouse is main perpetrator. This includes increased alertness, over cautiousness, mistrust and excess fear or rage towards their spouse which stays even after ending the traumatic relationship. If left untreated, this may almost permanently damage their ability to form new relationships and live happily.

Looking at PTRS in an Indian context, we see that the occurrence of these symptoms is influenced by many factors present during the time of the abuse, divorce, and post-divorce. Some of these are family support, the stress of lengthy legal procedures, and the nature of abuse, career, and coping strategies of the survivor and so on.

This suggests the importance of social and family support and understanding for individuals.
Subjects: Violent Crime; Physical & Sexual Abuse in Adults; Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Adults; Anxiety in Adults; Intimate Relations; Violence and Abuse

Keywords: Traumatic relationship; divorce; stress; PTRS; family

1. Introduction

“Marriage is coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred” (Genius, 2019).

Marriage is a sacred union of two individuals, supported and validated by society to form a social relationship (Sarkar & Nambi, 2015). But not all marriages result in successful relationships and satisfy the emotional needs of the individuals involved. Moreover, some relationships may even end up being troublesome, abusive or traumatic for the individual and thereby impair even their normal daily functioning or well-being. Such marriages may even run the risk of ending in divorce. Divorce is the legal termination of the marriage which can be sought for reasons ranging from infidelity to abuse, abandonment and so on (Premsingh & Philip, 2014).

In this study, we look into the experiences of individuals who have faced various kinds of abuse or trauma in their married life which consequently ended in divorce. Thereby we attempt to understand how they dealt with the long-term impact of the trauma post-divorce or if the repercussions persist. The study is set in a South Indian context, specifically looking at the state of Kerala due to the divorce rates consistently increasing by almost 350 percent over the last ten years, that also leads the country’s state-wise statistics (Advocatekhoj.com, n.d.; Girase, Haralkar, Mulaje, & Mangulikar, 2016; Premsingh & Philip, 2014). Studies also reveal an interesting pattern of increasing intimate partner violence (IPV) rates in the state despite being quite progressive in terms of gender equality (Jin, Doukas, Beitng, & Viksman, 2014; Mitra & Singh, 2007). The study aims to throw light on the much-needed after-care and support required by survivors of abusive relationships on a long-term basis from their family, society and legal services. Further, the study also highlights the difficulties and discrimination women face in the process of seeking divorce and coming out of their abusive relationships.

2. Literature review

As per global estimates based on WHO’s surveys, about one in three ever-partnered women have experienced IPV at some point and about 50 percent married women in India (Indu, Vidhukumar, Subha, Remadevi, & Anilkumar, 2011; World Health Organization, 2014). Although studies understanding the gender differences in IPV suggest that the relationship is not as unilateral as earlier perceived (abuse is always by male perpetrators against women) and that effects of an abusive relationship on the victim are significant in both males and females, females are more likely to report such complaints (Karakurt & Silver, 2013). IPV can range from a continuum of rare or extreme cases like homicide to behaviors like verbal assault, isolation, pushing, slapping, etc. (Jackson & Mantler, 2016). The aftereffects can be direct and physical like injuries of various kinds, other acute or chronic health conditions like migraine, irritable bowel syndrome, insomnia, sexually transmitted infections, etc. and mental effects like increased risk for depression, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, emotional detachment, PTSD like symptoms (Amato, 1994; Chandra, Satyanarayana, & Carey, 2009). Almost 31–84 percent of women who have faced IPV showed symptoms of PTSD and such chronic mental health consequences were greater for sexual IPV when compared to physical and psychological (Zolotor, Denham, & Weil, 2009). Besides, a study looking into trauma types and PTSD based on WHO survey statistics revealed that IPV led to the highest risk of developing PTSD in individuals which explains how IPV cases account for 42.7 percent of all PTSD cases reported (Kessler et al., 2017). Studies also suggest that traumatic relationship experiences can affect the individuals’ personality, coping mechanisms, strength and empowerment as well (Campbell, 2002; Devries et al., 2011; Orzeck, Rokach, & Chin, 2010).
In many cases of IPV, divorce which is the act of legally dissolving a marriage or termination of the relationship is a quite common outcome (Merriam-Webster, 2018). This process of leaving a traumatic relationship happens in four steps such of (1) enduring and disconnecting from abuse, (2) acknowledging the abuse, (3) “breaking free”, (4) coping with separation. Studies looking into mental aftermath of individuals post IPV and subsequent divorce or termination of relationship revealed that the complex PTSD-like cognitions were seen in a substantial proportion of individuals and it was quite beyond the generic boundaries of the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Further studies on these symptoms also revealed that it was necessary to treat and manage these abuse-related PTSD symptoms first to effectively treat the subsequent chronic pain symptoms (Wuest et al., 2009).

This led to the postulation of a diagnosis called Posttraumatic Relationship Syndrome (PTRS), which accounts for the anxiety symptoms in individuals after experiencing physical, emotional or sexual trauma or abuse in the context of an intimate relationship. It falls within the spectrum of Posttraumatic illnesses and shares symptoms with PTSD but is also significantly different in certain ways. The differences include (1) nature of stressor which can be physical, sexual and/or emotional occurring within the context of an intimate relationship, inflicted by the partner (unlike in PTSD where the stress can be either witnessed or experienced, PTRS requires direct experience of stress), (2) the response to stressor which involves a feeling on intense rage or terror towards perpetrator that is not always necessarily seen in PTSD, (3) coping with the trauma, unlike in PTSD, there is an absence of numbing emotional responsiveness, instead an oscillating experience of trauma arises. The avoidance of stimuli seen in PTSD is also absent in the case of PTRS, and (4) relational symptoms like hypervigilance, mistrust in intimate relationships and so on. The concept of PTRS stems from the understanding that traumatic stressors like IPV can distort an individual’s core functional illusions of individual invulnerability which are: (1) the world is benign or benevolent, (2) life has a meaning, (3) individual has the control of their own life, (4) positive self-worth. When an individual stops believing in these assumptions, they eventually lose faith and trust in other people (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003).

From a feminist perspective, IPV cannot be studied in isolation as an individual’s problem, but instead be placed in a social context taking into consideration how various factors like racism, poverty, and disability contribute to disabling conditions faced by the victims. Further, how these factors impair the efforts of government bodies, feminist anti-violence organizations in curbing and intervening IPV cases are also studied. The insensitivity from government bodies and police authorities towards victims of IPV grants them a label of “second offender” in IPV cases (Morrow, Hankivsky, & Varcoe, 2004; Pain, 1991; Tolman & Raphael, 2000).

Therefore, the need for understanding IPV and its aftermath arises from the rationale that there is an alarming increase in rates of divorce and IPV along with the understanding that the after-effects of the resultant trauma do not end with the termination of the relationship. In an Indian context, it also becomes important to understand how the social stigma attached to divorce and other socio-economic factors may contribute to these after effects, their readiness to seek help, as well in order to further formulate effective support and mental health care systems for these individuals (Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014; Herrman, Saxena, & Moodie, 2002; Patel, 2002; Trani et al., 2015). Studies on IPV conducted in India reveal that 39 percent of women who were victims of IPV come from low socioeconomic status combined with factors like illiteracy and influences of caste (Ackerson & Subramanian, 2008; Mahapatro, Gupta, & Gupta, 2012; Vidushy & Sethi, 2016). Studies also suggest that other factors like socially and culturally influenced the intergenerational transmission of violence, perceived power, alcohol abuse and early exposure to violence also play a major contributing role (Jin et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2002). Besides this, the study also investigates the personal factors or coping strategies employed by individuals and their effectiveness. Further, the inability to cope with the trauma of IPV even after termination of the relationship is looked at from the framework of the proposed PTRS diagnosis. This would include looking for characteristics like terror or rage towards stressor
who is the spouse in the abusive relationship and relational symptoms like hypervigilance or mistrust persisting even in new relationships (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2004).

3. Method
The current study employs a phenomenological study approach looking into the significant life events of individuals from a social constructivist paradigm. A quantitative perspective was avoided in the light of existing literature that criticized empirical approaches as insensitive, reductionist and superficial in understanding complex psychosocial problems like domestic violence. Further, a semi-structured interview method was used to understand and explore the unique experiences of the individuals (Bowman, 1992).

3.1. Sample and participant selection
The study was conducted on seven females from Kollam district in the state of Kerala, South India, who have been through domestic violence and/or abuse in their married relationship from their spouse and have been subsequently divorced for at least past one year. The snowball sampling method was used and participants were selected based on a brief informal interview. They were given a detailed briefing of a written informed consent explaining the aim, objectives and ethical aspects of the study before participation.

3.2. Data collection and analysis
The data was collected using a semi-structured interview and analyzed using a thematic analysis. As a part of the ethical considerations, the confidentiality of the participants was maintained throughout the research process and post-interview, psychological debriefing and emergency contact of mental healthcare centers for future psychological support in case of any distress relating to the research process were also provided. The data recorded electronically was transcribed from Malayalam to English, back-translated and further validated by an expert and data audit. The participants of the study and their demographic information are given in Table 1.

4. Results
The data were analyzed thematically and the basic themes that emerged from the data were grouped further into organizing and global themes as mentioned in Table 2.

Understanding the past experiences of the individual while they were in a traumatic relationship with various social and personal factors.

4.1. Married life
Marriage is defined by sociologists as a formal agreement that stabilizes a social relationship involving functions like reproduction, regulation of sexual behavior, child-rearing, socialization and so on, making it the basic foundation of a family (Nambi, 2005).

4.1.1. Family
In India, besides the union of two individuals, marriage also requires the respective spouses’ families to overlap and join to create a new subsystem as well (Berk, 2013).

4.1.1.1. Support in the decision of marriage and married life. India is one of the many countries where arranged marriages and consanguineous marriages are practiced, family involvement in deciding whom an individual marries is more often highly valued and has a strong supportive role throughout the married life which helps them cope with the difficulties in married life (Faye et al., 2013).

“it was a marriage they arranged without much thought. They hadn’t considered the decision a lot. So, after a month since the marriage itself, they admitted to me that it was a mistake they made, they didn’t think much. They told me I could decide what I want to do.” (P4P- personal conversation, 22 May 2018)
| Participant Code | Age | Marital Status | Occupation | Nature of Abuse | Years since divorce | Background Information |
|------------------|-----|----------------|------------|-----------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| P1M              | 25  | Divorced       |            | Physical        | 1                   | Love marriage, spouse had alcohol abuse causing conflicts, currently fully dependent on family, has a son. |
| P2SR             | 33  | Remarried     | Teacher    | Financial       | 4                   | Arranged marriage, had a history of depression, the spouse was overtly cordial but extorted money from her family referring to her past psychiatric illness. Currently remarried, has an ongoing case for child custody in the first marriage. |
| P4P              | 25  | Divorced       | Student    | Physical        | 1                   | Arranged marriage, spouse had alcohol abuse, no children, is currently fully dependent on family. The participant's father abandoned her at a young age after wife's death. |
| P5N              | 36  | Divorced       | Teacher    | Emotional       | 3                   | Arranged marriage with support from her family alone. After migrating, the spouse started excessive substance abuse, extramarital affairs, neglecting responsibilities. Currently lives with daughter. |
| P6H              | 35  | Divorced       | Teacher    | Physical, Emotional | 1 | Arranged marriage, spouse had conflicts under the instigation of his mother causing a feeling of inferiority, restricted working, isolated her from her family. Currently lives with parents and daughter. |
| P7S              | 22  | Remarried     | IT Professional | Physical, Emotional | 2 | Arranged marriage, the participant had a history of epilepsy. Spouse was suspicions of her medications, under instigations from friends leading to conflicts. No children in the previous marriage, currently remarried. |
| P8N              | 33  | Divorced       | Student    | Physical, Emotional | 5 | Arranged marriage, the spouse has a history of psychiatric illness due to the previous failure in relationship, still-birth of the child. She currently lives with her own family. |
Then finally my family decided and told him, ‘We don’t want her murdered. It is true that she eloped and married you but we don’t want her murdered.’ And then they told me ‘You didn’t listen to us (I had eloped with him one month before I turned 18), you went with him disobeying us. But now we are saving you from that life. If you live with him any further, he would kill you and your son.’” (P1M- personal conversation, 28 April 2018)

The participants explain how the support and involvement of their family in their marriage helped them cope with the problems by externalizing it. They also share the weight of the decision by supporting them in the process of coming out of a troublesome marriage (Faye et al., 2013).

4.1.1.2. Role of in-laws in married life
Since marriage involves the bonding between the families of the spouses as well, the relationship one share with their in-laws is also quite influential in the quality of their married life both positively and negatively (Fernandez, 1997).

“Everyone there- mother, father, and sister were very friendly to me. We didn’t have any trouble. Even when I once left their house after having a big fight and returned to my home, they had come to call me back. His sister is of my age and she is very loving.” (P1M- personal conversation, 28 April 2018)

“my mother-in-law kept prompting him that I have an education, don’t send me for work and all. She would say that if I had completed M.Ed., I would have gotten a better job than her son and would have shown the attitude of a college lecturer.” (P6H-personal conversation, 24 May 2018)

The two above mentioned cases explain how in-laws can have a positive, supportive effect or a hostile, detrimental effect on the quality of one’s married life respectively (Fernandez, 1997).
4.2. Problems
The aspects of problems such as the nature of abuse or IPV, the underlying cause, how the problems affected children and the point at which they decided to divorce are all factors that influence the trauma experienced by the participants in their married life.

4.2.1. Nature and cause of abuse
The nature of abuse can range from physical or emotional to financial and causes can be attributed either to the participant or the spouse (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990).

“I had the problem of epilepsy. So, I take continuous medication. We got married only after discussing it all. But when he discussed it with his friends, he concluded that I will no have children and I am taking these medications for some mental illness. Then he started creating problems. He started treating me keeping this in mind, started physical abuse, saying bad words and a lot of such issues.” (P7S- personal conversation, 20 May 2018)

The participant explains how minor suspicions further escalated into severe physical abuse in her married life (Follingstad et al., 1990).

4.2.2. Stress related to children
In many cases of abusive marriages, we may see that the victimized spouse remains in the relationship or decides otherwise for the sake of their children.

“I am happy. I feel this decision is for mine and my daughter’s good. Or else in the future, it would have affected my daughter as it did to me. So, it was for good I think.” (P5N-personal conversation, 5 May 2018)

The participant here explains how the decision of divorce was the best decision considering her child’s future and how it motivated her to escape the abusive relationship herself (Amato, 2014).

4.2.3. Decision of divorce
The decision to leave an abusive relationship happens in four steps: realizing, acknowledging, breaking free and coping with the separation. Hence, how one reaches this decision or if it were their spouse who decided for divorce or if it was mutual, plays a major role in how the individual copes with the separation (Anderson & Saunders, 2003).

“I did not take that decision, he did. He filed the case first and it was very difficult for me in the beginning. I had no interest in letting go, until later. At first, although it was very difficult later when I thought of situations, I felt it is better to have a better life. I felt getting a divorce is better.” (P2SR-personal conversation, 3 May 2018)

The participant mentions how coping with the divorce was difficult for her primarily because she wasn’t the one who filed for divorce in the first place and hence had difficulty coping with it (Anderson & Saunders, 2003).

4.3. Society
Since marriage in its very definition is a socially binding contract between two individuals, it is indeed affected by the support and influences of an eternal society as well.

4.3.1. Social support during married life
In many cases, participants did mention that they did require help and support from beyond their immediate family to deal with the problems in their married life.

“Later there were some people in his family who had some affinity for me. His mother and father were also loving to me, I won’t say otherwise … And with all of their support, we took him to a de-addiction center.” (P4P-personal information, 22 May 2018)
An aunty next to my house used to inform my father. Because my father’s office was just a house after my husband’s house. So, when that aunty saw him hurting me, she used to inform my father.” (P8N-personal information, 18 May 2018)

Besides family members and in-laws, it is seen from these cases that there maybe other individuals who play decisive roles in their lives who have helped them deal with the problems in their relationship (Asghari & Ramazannia, 2017).

5. Divorce
In an Indian context, divorce is looked down as a personal failure, a family tragedy or at times, even as a social problem (Nambi, 2005). Hence, the decision of divorce brings with it the stress of bearing these attributes as well.

5.1. Personal stress
In line with existing studies, divorce leads to personal stress and adjustment difficulties in some individuals while some others may benefit psychologically by breaking free from a difficult marriage. These effects are also influenced by several protective factors that moderate the relationship (Amato, 2014).

5.1.1. Overcoming fear, mistrust and grief
The negative psychological after-effects of a traumatic relationship may not always end soon after the divorce and this depends on several factors relating to the individual like if they wanted the divorce or other protective factors helping them cope with the decision (Amato, 2014). Similar instances arose in the case of most of the participants as well.

“I feel like the concept of ‘faith’ has died within me. I cannot trust anyone now, especially women as a whole. I have always been very loving to her. I’ve only lived for her and my child. But now, I cannot decide without thinking twice about it. Besides, I also feel like all these years of my life are in waste now.” (P5N-personal conversation, 4 May 2018)

The participant talks about how her abusive relation has caused more pervasive changes in her overall approach to life.

5.1.2. Social support in coping
Studies reveal a significant correlation between social support and positive mental health among women who apply for divorce (Asghari & Ramazannia, 2017). In the current study, participants who had strong social support were able to deal with the decision of divorce better than those who did not.

“I have many good friends by God’s grace, it is hard for you to always stand up alone for yourself. Sometimes you do need a lot of support, especially from family. And for me, in the beginning, I did not have that. It is after my family started supporting me, that I felt motivated to live again and feel stronger. I was changing as a person.” (P2SR-personal conversation, 3 May 2018)

The participant here explains how her friends, family, and others in society helped her cope with the decision of moving away from an abusive relationship rather than letting herself suffer (Asghari & Ramazannia, 2017).

5.1.3. Stress related to child custody
Studies suggest that divorced individuals experience stress related to child custody or how the parent who does not have custody rights of the child would be psychologically stressed by the same. Similar patterns were observed in most cases in the current study. In fact, in some cases, this was the only stressor holding the individual back from fully coping with the decision (Amato, 2014).
“But when I think of my son, that alone still hurts me a lot. He (ex-husband), has now given a second case against me. Since my second marriage is over, he wants full guardianship over our son. I won’t even be able to see him ... This is the only thing that still troubles me. Apart from this, I don’t regret getting the divorce or anything.” (P2SR-personal conversation, 3 May 2018)

The above cases explain how stress related to child custody can even act as a perpetuating factor for the pervasive stress of divorce (Amato, 2014).

5.2. Family
Similar to the need for support and involvement of ones’ family during the course of married life, the need for this support was observed to be influential even at the time of deciding to terminate the marriage (Faye et al., 2013).

5.2.1. Role in decision and support
In most cases, it was observed that individuals who had the support and involvement of their family at the time of deciding to terminate the relationship, felt more confident in the decision and coped better by rationalizing the decision in terms of how their family also wanted them to end this relationship (Rangarao & Shekar, 2002).

“my family, my father came and took me back. We initially thought of resolving the problems and sending them back. We filed a complaint also. But it was of no use and nothing got resolved. So, finally, we filed a divorce petition ... Right now, I at least have my family and if I go back a second time, I’ll lose my family also.” (P1M-personal conversation, 28 April 2018)

Here, we can see how the participant rationalizes her decision in terms of having her family’s support (Faye et al., 2013).

5.3. Legal process
The legal process of divorce in India is not only influenced by the Legislation system but also varies according to religion and culture. Hence the accessibility or ease of the process can also vary accordingly (Nambi, 2005).

5.3.1. Stress related to the legal processes
In some cases considered in this study, participants did mention experiencing stress related to the very process of obtaining a divorce while on the other hand there were also accounts of individuals who reported having no major role in the process as a result of the norms prescribed by their religion.

“Women have no serious role in the process called Thalaak. So, I didn’t feel much about it. But for some time, I did feel lonely. Maybe for one month or something” (P8N-personal conversation, 18 May 2018)

In this case, the participant explains how her culture minimizes her role in the entire process of divorce and thereby normalizes the whole experience as a part of life.

5.3.2. Harassment related to the legal process
Although not many studies look into how the legal bodies and institutions itself can act as means or source of stress or trauma, literature does suggest how negotiation process, related threats of non-support and internal emotional turmoil or conflicts can cause ambivalence, separation distress and prolonged anxiety in the individual (Kressel, 1997).

“While I went for counseling as a part of the procedure, the psychologist was a dirty person who only asked sex-related questions during individual sessions at the family court ... I walked away crying from there, saying I can’t do this anymore ... in many cases, the clients are being
abused in the family court by such people. At last after all these tortures, most girls simply sign the petition off and leave for the sake of it. I continued to fight so that my daughter receives what she is supposed to inherit. That is the only reason. Otherwise, the whole process is psychological and mental harassment.” (P6H-personal conversation, 24 May 2018)

In this case, the participant explains how the legal process of obtaining divorce itself was stressful for her and why she feels it needs to be made more people-friendly (Kressel, 1997).

Objective 2

Understanding how the individual deals with the traumatic relationship experience currently with social and personal factors.

5.4. Life at present
Life after divorce could often be challenged by complaints of loneliness, low self-esteem, and anxiety about forming a new relationship for both men and women (Santrock, 2014)

5.5. Personal factors
Although divorce does cause challenges to the future life of individuals involved, the way one copes with these difficulties in the long run is influenced by personal and social factors which can have a mediating or moderating effect on the process. These factors can either be stressors that negatively contribute to the process or protective factors that boost one’s resilience (Amato, 2014)

5.5.1. Persisting anxiety and grief
A study that led to the proposed diagnosis of PTRS did identify that individuals who have been through traumatic relationships may have long-standing anxiety symptoms similar to that of PTSD, such as mistrust in forming new relationships, hypervigilance and terror or rage towards the perpetrator who is the spouse. This trend was noticed in a few participants (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003).

“at home, when someone would talk about a new marriage or anything like that, I feel scared. Even if it is new friends or things like that, I am scared. This fear is new to me. I wasn’t like this before ... with new people, I find it hard to mingle. I fear what they expect from me, their intentions while talking to me and all. Suddenly all these thoughts come to my mind.” (P5N-personal conversation, 5 May 2018)

The participant has persistent fear and rage towards her perpetrator which is also generalized towards new future relationships (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003).

5.5.2. Grief related to child custody
Another major stressor that maintains the grief of a divorce in the individual’s life is child custody. According to studies, although the presence or absence of children in a marriage does not affect the decision of marriage significantly, the anxiety attached to their future does remain a major stressor (Amato, 2014; Rangarao & Shekar, 2002).

“This is the only thing that still troubles me. Apart from this, I don’t regret getting the divorce or anything. Because that felt like the right thing to do no matter what. It was a god-given chance. But my son I can’t even see him, he is my son after all.” (P2SR-personal conversation, 3 May 2018).

Here, the participant explains how her child’s custody remains as a source of pain although she has moved on with life otherwise (Amato, 2014).
5.5.3. Resilience and ability to rationalize the decision

Studies suggest that individuals who have faced adversities like divorce employ coping strategies like logical analysis, problem-solving approach or informational approach to effectively cope with the stress (Headey & Wearing, 1990).

“Even now, there is no reduction in his alcoholism ... I do feel sad. But then, I also think it is just a sadness which would stay for a while. He is still in the same condition. If he had changed, maybe it would have been better. Even now he picks fights and beats people, makes the same problems at their house. So, then why should I go back and die? I just have one child, I can take care of him somehow now.” (P1M - personal conversation, 28 April 2018)

The participant uses a very logical approach to understand her situation and cope with her decision (Headey & Wearing, 1990).

“Right from childhood, I grew up without my mother and father. So, from childhood itself, I have some maturity mentally ... So, from all those experiences, I have developed this maturity right from childhood. So, when my married life turned out to be like this, those experiences and all my other life experiences combined to make me more confident and more motivated in life to live further, on my own.” (P4P - personal conversation, 22 May 2018)

The participant in this given case copes with her decision by using an informational approach to cope with her decision and become more resilient in life (Headey & Wearing, 1990).

5.5.4. PTRS symptoms

The studies related to the proposed diagnosis of PTRS suggest significant patterns in emotional responses such as rage towards the perpetrator, lack of emotional numbing or avoidance of stimuli and some relational symptoms such as mistrust in future relationships, hyper-vigilance and so on. Some of these symptoms were markedly noted in some of the individuals even years post their divorce (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003).

“once the trust we build in a person is lost, we can never get it back. No matter what it is, even in the future, I don’t trust anyone, it is like that now, that is how it’s going.” (P5N - personal conversation, 5 May 2018)

The participant clearly shows how she still has mistrust and hyper-vigilance regarding future relationships (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003).

5.6. Protective factors

An individual’s coping process post a traumatic relationship happens in stages of denial, mourning, anger and finally readjustment (Kressel, 1980). Various psycho-social protective factors moderate this process like interpersonal resources, demographic characters and so on (Amato, 2014).

5.6.1. Family and social support

Maintaining and nurturing close relationships in society and family can provide security, reassurance and necessary emotional support to individuals who have been through a crisis like a divorce. It also plays a strong positive influence on children of divorced parents in helping them form trustworthy bonds again (Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1994; Hetherington, 1989; Moos & Schaefer, 1986).

“I have a best friend. And she is the one who helped me a lot. Because, when I see my ex-husband, somewhere outside, I feel some kind of shivering. Because I am afraid of him. In fact, in such a situation, maybe like counseling, she is the one who made me overcome it.” (P8N - personal conversation, 18 May 2018)
The participant explains how social support is very important even after termination of the relationship continues to cope with the persistent emotional problems (Moos & Schaefer, 1986).

5.6.2. Positive effect of career
Career and financial independence are important protective factors that enable divorced individuals and single parents remain resilient to difficulties of the transition since it enhances their status in the society and financial security (Sahoo & Raju, 2007).

“Then I changed my life to studies and all. My family changed the route. The mind wouldn’t get diverted if we sit alone at home. So, after getting involved in the business field and studies, the mind got diverted. Then I thought of all that very rarely only.” (P8N-personal conversation, 18 May 2018)

The participant explains how the shifting of her focus to studies and career helped her cope with the decision and develop resilience (Sahoo & Raju, 2007).

5.6.3. Remarriage and future of children
Although researches regarding the benefits of remarriage are mixed, it was noted that for participants who did remarry, it was a reassurance to themselves that they are still capable of forming meaningful relationships. However, understanding the difficulties of remarriage and how step-parenting would affect the future of the children also leads to mixed opinions (Santrock, 2014).

“Nowadays, I don’t think of that old relationship, as I don’t get a chance to think of it. I lead a very good life now, so I don’t think much about that. My life now is my husband, kids, family ... it’s a good life” (P7S-personal conversation, 20 May 2018)

“Second will always be second and remarriage will always be remarriage, that’s how society sees it. I’m afraid despite him being my daughter’s father, then how can I trust someone else to not abuse my child. So, I don’t think of a remarriage although I know that my parents can’t protect me always.” (P6H-personal conversation, 24 May 2018)

Here, in the first case, the participant explains how remarriage helped her cope with the traumatic experiences of her first marriage and move forward positively in life while in the second case, the participant expresses her concerns and doubts regarding remarriage and her related apprehensions (Hetherington, 1989).

The various factors that influence the current life situation of the individual such as career, remarriage, children and social support are all highly overlapping and interlinked. It further contributes to the individual’s resilience and personality traits as well (Amato, 2014).

6. Discussion and conclusion
The study was aimed to understand how well individuals who have been through a traumatic relationship has coped overtime after the termination of their relationship. The findings highlight the importance of support and involvement from the family and society of the individual. Further, it can be noted how individuals cope with the decision differently with the mediating influences of their personal and social factors like the ability to logically analyze the decision, career and so on. The intertwining of these social factors with protective factors seen in the current study explains the need for career, support from family and close friends, financial security and even remarriage in some cases (Amato, 2014; Garvin et al., 1994; Hetherington, 1989; Moos & Schaefer, 1986; Sahoo & Raju, 2007; Santrock, 2014). Thereby, the study highlights the need to spread awareness to family and friends of IPV survivors about the importance of their role in supporting and addressing the psychological issues of such individuals.
There is also a pattern of stress observed in the individuals concerning the legal processes of custody of the children. Children in previous marriage and thoughts of their future can also be influential in the anxiety symptoms, coping processes and resilience of individuals who have been in abusive relationships (Headey & Wearing, 1990; Kressel, 1980; Rangarao & Shekar, 2002). This finding suggests the need to review how well the legal system supports and handles sensitive issues like child custody and security, considering the well-being of both parent and child. Understanding and addressing this aspect is essential since such procedures may also leave a lasting impression on the child’s mental health.

Further, the study can be conducted on a wider population to understand how the different personality or societal factors are correlated with the persistent anxiety symptoms, across different societies. The current study can also be considered as a stepping stone towards future research in terms of obtaining better clarity and specificity in conceptualizing and screening PTRS across various cultures since the currently available screening tools and interventions still stem from a very generic PTSD perspective (Orzeck et al., 2010; Vandervoort & Rokach, 2006). Thereby we may also venture further into developing corresponding conceptualizations, treatment, and preventive interventions that use effective approaches like mindfulness techniques (Sathiyaseelan & Sathiyaseelan, 2014). These mediation interventions must be made mandatory and conducted by trained professionals who can help address the mental health issues of such individuals who have faced IPV (Kelly, 2000). Thus, it would be ideal if the initiation and implementation of such interventions can be made at a policy level by the legal and legislative bodies.

Moreover, it is also necessary to look at IPV and PTRS from a very social perspective to spread greater awareness amongst the public regarding the long-standing effects of domestic violence and abuse so that they may seek help and avail the health care services and legal privileges that are offered to them, better. The study also urges one to broaden their focus on domestic violence from an individual issue to a very relevant and dangerous social issue that needs to dealt with collectively and immediately as it affects not just the victimized individual but also their family and children as a whole, leaving lasting repercussions. This requires us to identify and tackle social causal factors that may be contributing to such violence within families such as alcohol consumption, poverty or intergenerationally transmitted violence (Bensley, Van Eenwyk, & Wynkoop Simmons, 2003; Jewkes, 2002). For this purpose, we cannot isolate the roles and duties of the legal system, media, social workers, mental health professionals and others who directly or indirectly involved in understanding and addressing such social problems. Hence, we need collective, politically orchestrated efforts and initiatives from the government encouraging professionals to study domestic violence, its causal factors, and long-term psycho-social impacts in broader perspectives to formulate effective solutions and preventive measures (Dietz, 2000). Thereby, we may move towards a safer society that works for the prevention of problems rather than cure.

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Appendix

Informed Consent

Research Student: Ria Mary Jojo

Study Title: Posttraumatic Relationship Experience of Divorced Individuals

Guided by: Dr. Anuradha S. (Professor, Christ University, Bengaluru)

I am a student from the Department of Psychology, Christ University, Bengaluru. This is a study being conducted as a part of our course requirement for the Masters in Clinical Psychology. We are requesting you to participate in a research study. The following are the information related to the study. Please take your time to read the same and please feel free to ask any questions before signing this document.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of individuals who have had traumatic close relationships and have divorced their spouses due to the same reason.

Procedures

If you wish to participate in the study, you will be required to take part in a personal interview. The interview may last for an hour or more based on mutual interest. The interview would involve questions regarding the traumatic experiences of the past relationship, divorce and current feelings about the experiences. However, intrusive questions will be avoided and you have full freedom to voice objections regarding answering any question as well. The responses will be recorded for further analysis.
Risk of Participation

The process of participating in the study would require you to recall your personal experiences, incidents, and memories of a former traumatic close relationship and divorce. Hence, it may cause you some amount of discomfort. However, the researcher is equipped with the skills to interview in a manner that minimizes risk and stress to the participant. Furthermore, the participants will also be provided with adequate support and debriefing post the interview along with the contact information of a therapist for their benefit.

Benefits to the participant

Traumatic experiences due to domestic violence or any kind of sexual, physical or emotional abuse can have very serious long-lasting effects on the mental health of individuals who have been through it. These effects may persist even after divorce or termination of the relationship. Through this study, we seek to understand the seriousness of these after-effects and further provide help to individuals who have suffered such trauma. Hence, by participating in this study, although there would be no direct monetary benefit, you will be contributing towards understanding a very serious issue in the society and the betterment of psychological services provided in this area.

The individual would also gain a better understanding of their problems and find a possible solution for managing them.

Alternatives to participation

Participation in the study is voluntary and the participant is free to withdraw from the study at any point without any penalty.

Confidentiality

Any information collected during the study from you will only be used for the research purpose. This includes your name, age, gender, education. Confidentiality and privacy of the information will be maintained.

Your research records may be reviewed by federal agencies who are responsible for protecting human subjects participating in research. This includes the Office of human research protections (OHRP) and by representatives of Christ University Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research.

Questions/Concerns

If you have any questions related to the procedures described in this document please contact ria.jojo@psy.christuniversity.in

If you have any concerns psychologically or emotionally and require further help or support, feel free to contact Sankar's Hospital, Kollam, Phone: 0474–2,743,847, for counseling or psychological help.

If you have questions concerning your rights in this research study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of participants in the research project. You may reach the IRB office Monday-Friday by calling or writing: Institutional Review Board, Christ University, Bengaluru, 560,029.
