EXPLORATORY STUDY

Restoring and Empowering Traumatized Girls in a Philippines-Based Independent Living Program: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract Researchers have examined knowledge and skillsets that enhance successful transitions into independent living for at-risk youth residing in independent living programs; however, few studies examine programs outside of the United States. Employing focus groups and participant-observation, this exploratory study examined areas of personal development, knowledge, and skills that former graduates, staff, and administrators of a Philippines-based independent living program believed essential for the success of young women with traumatic histories. Thematic analysis revealed three themes: (1) Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Well-Being, (2) Cultivating a Fighting Spirit, and (3) Financial Stability. Distinct from much of the literature, spiritual development, a mechanism of Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Wellbeing, and Cultivating a Fighting Spirit, a form of empowerment, emerged as important areas of development. The focal program emphasized personal development and restoration for the survival and success of young Filipina women in their agency.

Keywords Trauma · Girls · Violence · Treatment · Qualitative methodology · Cross-cultural

More than one billion children, half of all children in the world, are victims of violence every year (CDC 2015). Girls exposed to severe abuse and neglect are at risk for deleterious

short- and long-term outcomes, such as bullying in middle childhood and sexual victimization in adolescence (Finkelhor et al. 2009). As the prevalence and profound impact of child abuse and neglect became evident (e.g., Barth et al. 2013), programs were developed to help girls heal from adverse childhood experiences. In some of the most severe situations of child abuse and neglect, or abandonment, girls are unable to continue living with their families and are placed in residential centers (Yacat 2011).

Independent living programs (ILPs), a type of residential center, are designed to serve adolescents who are unable to remain with their families (Department of Social Welfare Development 2012). Most ILP research has focused on programs in the United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom (e.g., Stein 2006). Increasingly, research is being conducted on independent living programs in other countries (e.g., Reid 2007; Zeira and Benbenishty 2011); yet, few studies exist examining ILPs in Asian countries, such as the Philippines.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to illuminate some areas of personal development, skills, and knowledge that former graduates, staff, and administrators at a Philippines-based ILP believed were essential for young women's survival once they left the program. Expanding knowledge of programmatic approaches of ILPs (i.e., personal development, skill and knowledge building) in Asian countries may clarify similarities and differences cross-culturally, and perhaps provide new approaches or areas of development for U.S.-based ILPs to consider.

Effects of Violence Exposure on Girls

Violence against girls is a global problem. The Violence Against Children Survey (VACS) reported that in every

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country surveyed more than one in four girls experienced sexual violence (e.g., unwanted sexual touching, coerced sex, forced sex) (CDC 2015). Between 55 and 66 % of girls reported experiencing physical violence (i.e., overt actions that cause harm, potential harm, or threat of harm). Finally, 24 to 35 % of girls reported exposure to emotional violence (i.e., overt words that cause harm, potential harm, or threat of harm) (CDC 2015).

Girls exposed to violence are at risk for a myriad of negative outcomes (Classen et al. 2005). For example, girls (ages 13–24) in Swaziland exposed to sexual violence were 3.7 times more likely to contract sexually transmitted infections or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), nearly three times more likely to use alcohol and have unwanted pregnancies, and over two times more likely to feel depressed and attempt suicide (CDC 2015). Moreover, negative outcomes of violence exposure may be compounded by the developmental expectations of girls transitioning into young adulthood (e.g., educational attainment, interpersonal relationships, and financial independence), ultimately impeding successful outcomes of young women (Trickett et al. 2011).

Independent Living Programs

During formative periods of their life, most adolescents learn important knowledge and skills required to transition successfully into adulthood from their biological families. However, youth who are unable to remain with family often rely on foster care and ILPs to develop these skills. The primary aim of ILPs is to facilitate young adults' successful transition to self-sufficiency through personal development, and skill and knowledge building (Antle et al. 2009; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006; Zeira and Benbenishty 2011).

Traumatic histories (e.g., severe or chronic violence) often create significant educational, behavioral, and mental health challenges for youth across the world, making successful transitions into adulthood more difficult (Courtney et al. 2001; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006). Developmental psychopathology theorists assert that unresolved childhood trauma could have cascading effects into other developmental domains; that is, maladaptive behavior can undermine cognitive and socio-emotional development necessary for young women's success in adulthood (Masten and Cicchetti 2010). For example, researchers have reported that youth exiting ILPs in England and the United States are less likely to obtain a high school diploma, achieve financial independence, and participate in post-secondary education or training (Biehal et al. 1994; Courtney et al. 2001, 2005; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006). While studies indicate that 40–80 % of adolescents were employed when discharged from ILPs in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, young adults' ability to live independently remained limited, as most jobs were part-time or paid minimum wage (Biehal et al. 1994; Courtney

et al. 2001; Zeira 2009). Finally, researchers reported that 15–28 % of youth were homeless three to nine months after being discharged from ILPs in Europe and the United States (Biehal et al. 1994; Courtney et al. 2001; Daining and DePanfilis 2007).

In order to address these challenges, ILPs focus on skill building in the following areas: education and employment (e.g., high school equivalent classes, resume and interview preparation), interpersonal development (e.g., healthy relationship development and maintenance), and household/life management (e.g., financial management, family planning, problem solving) (Courtney et al. 2001; Leathers and Testa 2005; Lemon et al. 2005; Loman and Siegel 2000; Osterling and Hines 2006; Reid 2007). However, the preponderance of research available is limited primarily to studies conducted with ILPs in the United States, despite the growth of ILPs in other countries such as the Philippines. Thus, a better understanding of programmatic similarities and differences cross-culturally is warranted.

Contributions of the Current Exploratory Study

Considerable research has focused on the programmatic design and developmental foci of ILPs serving adolescents transitioning into adulthood (e.g., Antle et al. 2009; Zeira and Benbenishty 2011). While this research has enhanced the services provided to youth, it is primarily limited to ILPs based in the United States (e.g., Courtney 2009). Moreover, outcome studies examining U.S.-based ILPs illuminate challenges faced by youth transitioning out of care despite receiving services (e.g., Courtney et al. 2011; Montgomery et al. 2006; Stein 2006). Contextualizing the programmatic design and developmental foci of ILPs in other countries, such as the Philippines, may broaden existing areas of development currently emphasized by programs in the United States. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore areas of personal development, and skills and knowledge that former graduates, staff, and administrators at a Philippines-based ILP believed were essential to young women's successful transitions into adulthood. The following research question guided this exploratory study: According to young women "graduates," staff, and administrators of a Philippines-based ILP, what areas of development are critical for the successful transition of young women into independent living?

The Philippines Context

Earning the fourth highest population growth rate in Southeast Asia, children (0–17 years old) constituted 42 % of the total population in the Philippines in 2012 (Yacat 2011). Poverty in the Philippines is overwhelming: more than 30 million families were reported to be destitute, nearly four million children are considered "working children" (most of who engage in hazardous work), and nearly 50,000 children are considered

“street children,” whose families are homeless (Yacat 2011). The capital of the Philippines, Manila, has been ranked as the second most vulnerable city in the world to natural disasters (Sundermann et al. 2012). These natural disasters strain the family system through displacement or separation of families, limit access to basic needs such as clean drinking water, and hinder access to social services such as education. Furthermore, some areas of the Philippines are under the threat of armed conflict, risking the safety of and contributing to the disruption of families (United Nations 2016). These complexities create a challenging environment for the development of children and families.

The Philippine Department of Social Welfare Development (DSWD) oversees social protection for all vulnerable populations, including but not limited to children, youth, and disadvantaged families. Under an initiative established by the DSWD and the Council for the Welfare of Children, child services include prevention, early detection and intervention, recovery and rehabilitation, and aftercare (DSWD 2012). Recovery and rehabilitation, one of the four focal areas of the initiative, has spawned 61 DSWD-managed residential care facilities and 145 accredited residential care facilities managed by non-government organizations (NGO) (DSWD 2012). According to the most current reports, the DSWD served 16,831 clients in residential care centers and 1059 in non-residential centers in 2012. Of those served in residential care centers, 17.5 % were children (i.e., 0–14 years old) and 8 % were adolescents (i.e., 15–17 years old). Reports suggest that the majority of children enter residential care for economic reasons (i.e., poverty) and family problems, such as abuse, neglect, or parental abandonment (DSWD 2012).

Association Compassion Asian Youth

¹ The study of Association Compassion Asian Youth (ACAY) was recommended by a foundation based in the United States and the Philippines due to the program’s unique approach. ACAY, is a NGO based in the province of Balanga, Bataan in the Philippines. ACAY’s mission is to provide an ILP for youth using a creative, educational approach that restores dignity and the meaning of life (ACAY 2015). The School of Life (SOL) program, a division of ACAY, is designed for young women ages 14 to 21 years old who have been victims of child abuse and neglect, trauma, exploitation (i.e. sex trafficking), abandonment, or severe poverty (ACAY 2015). Referral sources (e.g., child welfare officials, group home workers) provide opportunity for young women to voluntarily enter the program. The age at which participants began the program and the duration of stay varied; nevertheless, girls typically spent

several years in the program before exiting into independent living. Cohorts consisted of three to eight girls each year.

SOL provides training to rehabilitate and improve young women’s social functioning and develop basic skillsets in order to achieve independence and become productive members of society. These services are provided in a familial, therapeutic environment that enables young women to rebuild dignity and self-esteem, and empower them to find meaning in their lives (ACAY 2015). Based on the first author’s observation of multiple ILPs in the Philippines and informal interviews with the lead social worker at SOL, ACAY’s familial, therapeutic approach appeared unique (Y. Dontogan, personal communication, June 3, 2012). The program focuses on five components: (1) educational assessment and training; (2) personality development and acquisition of life skills; (3) psychological support, provided primarily through mentoring and counseling; (4) spiritual development; and (5) career assessment and development. Although the program did not explicitly state therapeutic services for trauma survivors, elements of the Self-Trauma therapy were evident (Briere 2002). That is, the first author observed the program staff and administrators intervening with survivors’ impaired self-functioning via enhancing feelings of safety and support (e.g., safe living conditions; a weekly “sharing” with a mentor), facilitating self-awareness and positive identity (e.g., designated responsibilities in group home to encourage accomplishment and success), addressing boundary issues in therapy sessions with case managers, and addressing relatedness problems using important relationships among the girls and staff (Briere 2002).

Method

Exploratory studies are designed to aid underdeveloped areas of research, such as those lacking conceptual or theoretical direction, and to generate hypotheses for future research (Maxwell 2012). Because a dearth of studies have examined ILPs with cultures outside of the United States, we employed an exploratory approach. Specifically, we aimed to identify areas of personal development, knowledge, and skillsets deemed valuable to graduates, staff, and administrators of a Philippines-based ILP.

Sample

A criterion sample, i.e., a type of purposive sampling (Padgett 2008), was used to recruit former graduates, staff members, and administrators over three months in 2012. The Filipina graduates had to be: (1) 18 years or older, (2) a former participant of the ACAY SOL program, (3) of Filipino nationality, (4) willing and able to provide informed consent, and (5) possess moderate English speaking skills. The ACAY SOL staff members had to be: (1) a current staff member of ACAY, (2) at least 18 years old, (3) willing and able to provide informed consent, and (4) speak fluent English. Finally, the

¹ The focal agency wanted to use the real name in the manuscript; thus, it has not been changed. However, all of the participant names used are pseudonyms.

administrators had to: (1) identify as current administrators of ACAY, (2) speak fluent English, and (3) be willing and able to provide informed consent.

Participants

The three groups had a total of 11 participants. Graduating from different cohorts over the previous seven years, the first focus group consisted of Filipina women from the earliest and the most recent cohorts in the program. Upon graduation from the program, many young women moved into the city of Manila for educational and employment opportunities. Due to the distance between the focal program and Manila, access to former graduates proved difficult. Consequently, recruitment was limited to graduates who remained in the area ($n = 10$). Of those graduates in the area, four women consented to participation. The other six potential participants chose not to participate due to work obligations and time constraints.

The graduates reflected on their experiences as adolescents in the SOL program. These young women shared the knowledge and skills garnered during their tenure that best prepared them for independence, and areas of development that were inadequate for their transition into adulthood. The graduates ranged in age from early- to late-20s, were Filipina, had completed high school, and were employed. Three women were administrative assistants, and one woman worked as an aid in a pediatric clinic. Two women were actively pursuing, and two had completed, their bachelor's degree. All of the graduates were single. One woman had a four-year-old daughter. The former graduates had been living independently for an average of four years. All of the graduates in the exploratory study had extensive histories of trauma, a common background among girls entering the SOL program. A review of all case files from the program's inception in 2000 indicated that young women entering the SOL program most commonly experienced sexual and physical abuse as a form of trauma, followed by neglect and abandonment, and, finally, a small proportion had been forced into the sex trade to generate financial support for their families.

The entire staff of the SOL program (100 %, $n = 3$) participated in the exploratory study. Their experiences provided detailed insight into the struggles and successes of young women who participated in the program since its inception, coupled with the areas of development they believed to be essential for the graduates' survival after exiting the program. All of the staff members were female, Filipina, and in their early to mid-30s. One woman was pursuing her Master's degree in social work, another was pursuing her Bachelor's degree in social work, and the last woman completed a Bachelor's degree in nursing. Collectively, the staff reported 20 years of experience working with traumatized youth and four to eight years working with the SOL program.

Finally, all of the administrators serving ACAY volunteered to participate in the focus group (100 %, $n = 4$). The

administrators were able to provide an “insider-outsider” perspective of the Filipino culture while acknowledging the lens of their respective cultures, and how these cultural forces related to working with Filipina adolescents. They also provided underlying concepts of the program design and intended outcomes for the youth. The administrators ranged in age from mid-30s to mid-40s. The administrators were from France, Poland, Hungary, and Australia. Two of the administrators had completed Bachelor's degrees, and two had high school diplomas. The administrators were Catholic nuns, also referred to as “Sister(s),” who originally came to the Philippines 15 years earlier as part of their mission work. After their mission work was complete, the Sisters decided to remain in the Philippines to found the ACAY agency because they recognized the lack of services for this high-risk population.

Entry into the Field

Based on Bernard's (1994) recommendations, several steps were taken to gain entry into the field and establish rapport. Upon arrival in the Philippines, the lead author met with the program head of ACAY to discuss the aims, acceptability, and suitability of the exploratory study, and allow the administrators to ask questions to ensure complete understanding. Next, informal conversations were held with staff members at the agency to discuss the exploratory study and assess their willingness to participate. The staff communicated full support. The first author then met with the resident agent of ACAY and the former graduates. This was necessary to ensure that the graduates felt safe, could ask questions, and could decline participation to a trusted member of the staff who spoke Tagalog (i.e., the native language of the Philippines). Finally, the lead author met with the program head to review focus group scripts and study materials for cultural appropriateness and sensitivity. After gaining approval from the agency, the proper paperwork was submitted to and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection

The data collection methods employed in this exploratory study consisted of focus groups and participant-observation. In 2012, the lead author conducted three focus groups, lasting 1.5 to 3 hours each, with the administrators, staff, and graduates of the SOL program. Focus groups were segmented into homogenous subgroups to facilitate the analysis of differences and similarities, to increase external validity of comparisons across sub-groups, and to increase participants' willingness to disclose information that otherwise may be deterred by distinctions in status (Krueger 1994). Additionally, the lead author served as a participant-observer, gaining an insider perspective of in the inner workings of the SOL program. She immersed herself with the population, spending three months

living in the Philippines, on-site at the agency, and working with the administrators, staff, and active cohort of adolescent girls in the SOL program. Field notes were generated during this time (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002).

Data Analysis

Participant observation calls for researchers to begin data collection immediately upon arrival to the environment of study. Thus, the first author created field notes documenting the environment in the Philippines (i.e., built and natural environment), and systematic processes in the community and agency (e.g., case management meetings). Additionally, interactions among staff members, between staff members and the youth, and among the youth were observed and recorded. Informal interviews were conducted with the administrators and staff members that ultimately contributed to the refinement of focus group protocols.

The focus groups were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Both authors completed accuracy checks of the transcription process. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Boyatzis 1998). That is, the authors separately conducted open (breaking apart and delineating concepts to represent blocks of raw data) and axial coding (relating concepts to each other) for each transcript, resulting in a list of in-vivo and descriptive codes (Miles and Huberman 1994). After the interviews were coded separately, the authors met to review the transcripts. The authors reviewed their codes and identified emerging themes in the data. Any disagreements regarding coding, concepts, or themes were discussed between the authors and were resolved only after consensus was reached between the authors.

Trustworthiness

A number of steps were taken to increase credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985). During the focus groups, member checking was conducted to confirm and clarify tentatively identified issues. Upon completion of each focus group, memos were generated identifying impressions of agreement and verbal or nonverbal dissent. In addition, separate focus groups with the administrators, staff, and graduates, comprising 100 % of the agency personnel, allowed for triangulation of the data (Creswell and Miller 2000). The field notes documented during prolonged engagement as a participant-observer served as data sources to enhance the quality of the focus group findings.

Results

This exploratory study identified developmental domains, knowledge, and skills that graduates, staff, and administrators

of a Philippines-based ILP believed were essential for adolescents' successful transition into independent living. Data analysis revealed three themes that fostered healing in traumatized youth and enhanced the likelihood of self-sufficiency. The themes were titled Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Well-Being, which was cultivated through three pathways (1) a "sense of belonging," (2) "spiritual development," and (3) "a sense of purpose"; Cultivating a Fighting Spirit, which was developed via "challenging subservience" and "encouraging empowerment"; and Financial Stability.

Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Well-Being

In the SOL program, the Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Well-Being of young women was cultivated through three processes: developing a sense of belonging, spirituality, and purpose. These processes were communicated using several messages to young women. First, young women were shown that they were valuable and that they would always have a place to call home. Second, the program conveyed the importance of trusting in God during difficult times. Finally, developing the belief that they were powerful and able to shape society fostered a sense of purpose.

Sense of Belonging

The "family" (i.e., the staff and Sisters) of the program impressed upon young women that they mattered, would be cared for and loved, and would always have a place to call home. These impressions conveyed a strong sense of belonging to the girls. Sister Lena, an administrator, described why establishing a sense of belonging was essential to the program: "otherwise, they will continue searching for belonging which often leads them to the depths of despair because they can't feel they belong."

Most of the young women at ACAY were abused, neglected, or abandoned by their families, and, as a result, were unable to return home. Providing these youths with a sense of belonging was paramount to aid their path to self-sufficiency. Gabrielle, a Filipina staff member, articulated the significance of a sense of belonging, "When [the youth] feel that they are safe, they are understood, they are loved, they will be able to live like a normal person who had not been abused. They will be able to overcome their abusive experience."

To restore a sense of self and belonging, the program helped young women establish safe, trusting relationships with individuals in a family-like setting and mend ties with their biological families when beneficial. For example, girls in the program were taught to refer to staff members as *ate* (pronounced "a-teh"; translated as "big sister") or *kuya* (translated as "big brother"), rather than "madam" or "sir"—typical in

other ILPs in the Philippines, creating a family like setting within the agency. Additionally, the staff and volunteers regularly ate meals with the youth, providing a sense of family and enhancing a sense of belonging within young women.

The staff, administrators, and graduates described how strength is derived from the family, whether biological or functional, and as a result, youth felt loved and received emotional security. Instilling a sense of importance and acceptance in the youth resonated with several graduates. Lara, a graduate who has lived independently for approximately 7 years, remarked:

It's very important to always have someone that [will] journey with you. The sense of family belongingness, it is very important. ... One time, I ran away and they found me on the streets and brought me back to the program. So I just felt very important. It's one of the factors that keeps me going...keeps me knowing that I have to continue.

Establishing a trusting, respectful relationship with traumatized youth enabled a sense of belonging. Ultimately, this sense of belonging established emotional safety, aiding in a more confident transition into independent living. Moreover, this functional family remained a major form of support even after the young women were discharged.

Spiritual Development

The Filipino religious² context was evident upon arrival to the Philippines. Crucifixes appeared on the walls of most public and government buildings, and jeepneys, a bus-like form of transportation and a ubiquitous form of Filipino culture, were often decorated with religious icons (e.g., religious figures, crucifixes). Although religion is an important value in the Philippines, the SOL administrators and staff emphasized the role of spirituality³ over religion. Nena, a graduate, confirmed this view, saying, "I knew the basics of the Bible. I knew the verses. But...it's just...I knew it by mind, not by heart." Spirituality was recognized as something more than knowledge of biblical passages or attending religious services; rather, spirituality was described as a deep, abiding relationship with God that young women relied on for guidance, especially during difficult times.

The staff and administrators emphasized that spirituality is a means to ameliorate the effects of a stolen childhood. An administrator, Sister Patricia, illuminated the effect of spirituality on the trajectory of youth:

² Religion "refers to scripture, ritual, myths, beliefs, practices, moral codes, communities, social institutions...the outward and objectified elements of a tradition" (Roof 2003, p. 138).

³ Spirituality refers to "the presence of a relationship with a higher power that affects the way in which one operates in the world" (Armstrong 1995, pg. 3).

It's really a big help to discover a personal relationship with God, to discover God to be their father, rather, not to discover—to experience...to experience being a child again and to be able to open themselves to trust. This feeling of having their life in the hands of God, God who is their father.

Spirituality restored a sense of trust, providing a sense of *ma pag-asa* (hope) and a better understanding of oneself. The graduates and administrators believed that spirituality was essential for these young women to develop aspirations and to give the girls a source of strength to draw upon when facing adversity.

Sense of Purpose

The staff and administrators described that, upon entry, low self-esteem was evident in the girls, who viewed themselves as victims and presented with attitudes of *kawawa* (the pitiful or poor one). Tabatha, a graduate of SOL, reflected on her arrival to the program: "...the way I look at myself in terms of the esteem, I don't have any self-esteem at all." Due to the violent and abusive histories of these girls, many young women felt helpless and worthless upon arrival to the program. Challenging a victim-mentality through empowerment and development of a sense of purpose in young women was a critical step to foster independence. Sister Anita, the head administrator, remarked:

As the first step, we must say, okay, yes, you have been abused, but that's not your entire life and it's not who you are. You can run. You can stand again. You can gain back your courage that you once had.

Believing young women had potential and aiding in that self-discovery was a critical part of developing a sense of purpose. Ivy, a Filipina social worker staff member, stated:

The first factor for the success of these girls is the team in the School of Life, a team who sees these girls not as victims or not as *kawawa*, not as somebody who should be pitied, but a team who looks at these girls as individuals who have potential...awakening their belief that they themselves have something to offer.

A sense of purpose or leading a purposeful life was an important indicator of the young women's transition away from a victim mentality, as they were no longer focused on themselves; rather, they focused on what they had to offer the world. Sister Anita explained:

Once you have found that, it's not something extraordinary. It can be a very simple life. But if you are sure that

the family life you are living is your place in this world, the job you are doing is the vocation for you, where you can really develop to the maximum of your potential, everything will be totally transformed, because you will put a lot of creativity into everything you do, because it's where you belong, to where you are called to be, and who you are called to be.

Mila, a graduate of the SOL program and now a teacher, who has been living independently for 4 years, reflected on her progress through the program:

I arrived at the School of Life six years ago. When I arrived, I was not the Mila you know today. When I entered the School of Life, I was a little girl and I didn't know what will happen to me. My future was a big question mark. When I was at the School of Life, I realized that I love children. And maybe that's why I took up as a teacher. I also found that I love talking with people just to have fun, but what I like most is that I wanted to share with them. I love sharing my experiences with others and learning about their experiences also. Through that, I learned a lot. For me, it's really a big deal to have my diploma, my certificate, to show that I finished my studies...because it's really important for me to tell others that even if I have a broken family and have experienced a lot of traumatic things, still, I achieved this . . . I have achieved my dreams, my goals.

Establishing a sense of purpose was a salient part of preparing young women in SOL for their transition to independence. Thus, the staff and administrators worked with the youth to discover their passions and, subsequently, develop goals to achieve those passions. Tabatha, a graduate, stated: "I knew deep inside that I wanted to change something. I wanted to achieve something greater than what I have right now." For Tabatha and the other young women, a sense of purpose gave them direction in life as they entered adulthood.

Cultivating a Fighting Spirit

Young women were encouraged to advocate for themselves by way of challenging harmful behavior engrained from their families and broader society. The administrators and staff regularly referred to "disturbing the youth," "shaking them up," or "pushing them" to provoke young women to continuously learn, evolve, and question what it means to be a Filipina woman. Specifically, the SOL Sisters and staff sought to establish a "fighting spirit" in the young women. Someone who has a fighting spirit is willing to question things, to be of strong character and intellect, and to advocate for themselves and others. A young woman with a fighting spirit was

considered by the staff, administrators, and graduates to have a greater chance of success after completing the program. The development of a fighting spirit materialized through challenging subservience and encouraging empowerment.

Challenging Subservience

The Sisters and staff attempted to dismantle the belief that children should be seen and not heard, a cultural norm in the Philippines. The Sisters and staff believed that this cultural norm often perpetuated violence and abuse against children. Sister Helen, an administrator, commented:

There is a cultural aspect which is perhaps deepening this problem [of healing from trauma]. [In] the Philippines still, many of the families, the parents, they teach their children [that] you should not talk. When visitors are at the home, you should not talk . . . You have no opinion to tell. You just follow, because you are children. They are good if they are silent. If they accept everything.

Because of the violent histories of these youth, encouraging silence can have devastating effects. Sister Helen remarked, "If you don't talk, you'll be angry, and then how [will] you manage your anger? . . . We teach them how to say the truth even if it's difficult to say what they think." Teaching young women to protect themselves via encouraging strong voices, setting boundaries with others, and advocating for themselves equipped young women to confidently live independently as adults.

Additionally, youth were encouraged to advocate for themselves despite their debt of gratitude. *Utang na loob* or "debt of gratitude" requires young women to provide care for their families regardless of their own needs and aspirations. Lara, a program graduate, explained, "It's part of the culture here in the Philippines. If the parents or the relatives help you, it means...it's like a lifetime obligation after you've finished your studies to help them, to give back what you've received from them." The *debt of gratitude* portrays the strong family values of Filipinos. However, for high-risk youth, the *debt of gratitude* can have deleterious effects. For example, Mila, a graduate who endured sexual abuse while living in her aunt's home, described the complexity of advocating for oneself:

My tita [aunt] has asked me to live with her...I don't want to live with her, because in the past there was a problem every time I went to her house...[so] whenever I go there or think of her house, I get an immediate flashback of what happened. So I don't want to [live] with her... And she says that I don't know how to give back what she gave to me...but she doesn't understand. It's—I've already explained it to her so many times.

Despite the harmful histories (e.g., abuse, neglect, and abandonment) or the current living conditions of their families (e.g., living in slums), young women were expected to return home and assist with family needs. For this high-risk group, fulfilling the debt of gratitude may threaten their ability to become self-sufficient. Cultivating a fighting spirit in these women increased the chance that they would value self-preservation over subservience, and thereby enhance their odds of successfully transitioning into independent living.

Encouraging Empowerment

Because the Philippines are a patriarchal society, the girls entering the program were often taught by their families to defer to men. This mentality effects women's sense of independence, self-assurance, and assertiveness, and can subsequently increase their risk of exposure to violence. Sister Anita, an administrator, described how women's deference to men countered the fighting spirit, "I'm a martyr. I don't move. I don't fight... I don't react... I don't stand. I'm just a martyr, and I accept everything from my husband. So the daughter imbibes the same thing."

The staff and administrators' empowered women through educational opportunities and productive roles in the SOL program. Education was valued as a process to empower these young women to fight for themselves. An administrator, Sister Lena, explained, "I think the greatest part of the education of the young people is to... try to sow that seed in them, that they really need to fight for themselves..." Nena, a graduate of the SOL program who has lived independently for four years, articulated a deep sense of accomplishment from pursuing education, "I see that education is like the treasure that you could have in you that nobody can take." Young women were put into leadership (e.g., head of the gardening team) and management roles (e.g., supervise the weekly meal plan, balance the meal budget, and stock the pantry) in order to foster confidence, a positive sense of self, and self-sufficiency. These roles came in the form of gardening, cooking, cultural, and English-language groups. As part of their program, young women were expected to participate, lead, and manage the needs of each of these groups, providing multiple opportunities to empower young women in a safe environment.

Financial Stability

Financial stability focuses on providing young women with the skills to be self-sufficient once they leave the program. The program's financial curriculum consisted of several components. First, young women were expected to find a vocational niche and cultivate it with the support of SOL during their time in the program. For example, one young woman pursued

an internship trained as a chef in a major restaurant and several other women trained as nail technicians to generate income. Additionally, program participants were trained in budget management and designed and executed a savings plan while in the program. Finally, as part of the aftercare program, financial assistance was provided to youth after exiting the program. Specifically, financial assistance was provided for six months after completion of the SOL program and was distributed using a scaffold approach, i.e., starting with more assistance and reducing assistance after each month.

Despite the financial preparatory plan provided by the SOL program, the graduates transitioning into independent living struggled to attain financial stability. As a result, the demands of independent living threatened graduates' ability to complete their education. Mila described her life during college:

There are many times that I don't eat, because I—yeah, it's true. I don't eat. During the night, I can't sleep, thinking about all of my concerns...my school, my teaching practicum, my personal problems, and it all comes back to [lack of] finances.

Balancing work and higher education significantly strained their lives. Reflecting on how they persevered, the graduates explained that they borrowed money from family or committed petty theft (i.e., jump buses to avoid payment) to make ends meet. In a more severe case, Mila, a graduate of the program, asked her abusive aunt for financial assistance after exhausting all other options:

[At the time] I don't know what to do, because since I'm in my last year of study, I have my teaching practicum and my classes, and it's like at night, it will be—it's not realistic for me to work, because at night, I need to prepare my lessons, my activities for school, and I need also to study, because I have six classes, aside from my teaching practicum, and I have my thesis... I was really crying, because I don't know...I didn't want to give up my studies, but I didn't know where will I get the money that I need? So I asked my aunt if she could help me financially, because I knew she could afford it, because she had enough money to support me, even if not fully supporting me, but she could help with some... I'm not in good terms with my tita [aunt], but I let my pride go.

Even with educational degrees, financial insecurity plagued the youth's future success. Without savings to draw from, resources needed to apply and interview for employment proved too exhausting for many young women as Lara described:

I saw that many of the girls, after graduating, it's the main problem, financial. It's like they were not able to

continue, because unlike others who were very strong, who [had the] determination to continue on... It's like it will add up to your, to your thinking, oh, I really can't do it.

Despite the financial preparatory curriculum of SOL, the four graduates described financial insecurity as their greatest barrier to success. That is, the lack of financial support threatened young women's ability to become fully self-sufficient.

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify areas of personal development, skills, and knowledge that graduates, staff, and administrators of a Philippines-based ILP considered essential for young women's journey toward self-sufficiency. These exploratory findings contribute to the limited ILP research outside of the United States, particularly in the Philippines. Three themes emerged from the lived experience of four young women who "graduated" from the program and the staff and administrators who served dozens of young women as they transitioned into independent living: Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Well-Being, Cultivating a Fighting Spirit, and Financial Stability.

Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Well-being is important, as many of these young women presented with significant histories of abuse and victimization. Histories of abuse affected the girls' sense of self-worth and purpose as they developed into young women. The program helped young women realize they are not victims, to discover their own potential and value in the world, and to discover a purpose in life. Cultivating a Fighting Spirit taught young women critical thinking skills and encouraged them to challenge beliefs or norms that may seek to silence, oppress, or limit their ability to achieve goals. Finally, Financial Stability cultivated career and financial skills (e.g., vocation identification and training, budget management) designed to foster independence after leaving the program. Nevertheless, poverty deterred young women from completing higher education and pursuing professional employment, often creating psychological and physical stress. Graduates expressed the need for greater support to achieve financial stability.

Some of the exploratory findings are consistent with previous research on ILP's in the United States. That is, most ILP focus on some version of psycho-emotional and financial skill development (Antle et al. 2009; Keller et al. 2007; Loman and Siegel 2000; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006; Reid 2007). The psycho-emotional development most often emphasized includes forming and maintaining healthy relationships, building positive self-image and self-esteem, and social skills (Ahrens et al. 2008; Loman and Siegel 2000). Additionally, financial stability is a critical, yet elusive status for many

youth transitioning to adulthood (Casey et al. 2010; Loman and Siegel 2000). As a result, ILPs in the United States often develop financial skills, such as budgeting, money management, and opening a checking account, in their programs. Nonetheless, financial stability remains a major challenge facing youth exiting ILPs in the U.S. The SOL program encountered similar challenges and did not identify a better way to secure financial stability for the graduates.

Spirituality, as an area of development for trauma survivors, is an under-explored area of research particularly with ILPs in the United States. While the emphasis on spiritual development in the focal agency may be a reflection of the cultural and political context of the Philippines, i.e., the non-secular nature (Church 1987), social service programs in the United States and elsewhere certainly incorporate religious faith (Smith and Teasley 2009). For example, in a comparison analysis of faith-based programs serving homeless and street-living youth in cities in the United States, Kenya, and India, researchers found that religious faith, particularly Christianity, served to help youth's sense of self-worth and belonging, and provided hope and direction in life (Ferguson et al. 2006). Nevertheless, a dearth of research exists "identifying specific programmatic mechanisms that enhance client outcomes" (Smith and Teasley 2009, pg. 322). The results of this exploratory study contribute to this gap; to wit, spiritual development was a key mechanism for Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Wellbeing of traumatized youth in that it restored trust, provided hope, and advanced a deeper sense of self.

In addition, Cultivating a Fighting Spirit has not been previously reported in the literature. In part, this theme may have emerged from a combination of the cultural context of the Philippines and the Western belief system brought by the European and Australian nuns running the agency. Specifically, encouraging forms of individualism in a collectivist society took the profile of 'challenging subservience' and 'encouraging empowerment'. Also, this theme is likely rooted in the needs of traumatized youth. That is, youth with histories of abuse and trauma are more likely to have lower self-esteem and self-worth. In order to restore and empower these youth, challenging silence or subservience to others is necessary to protect and advocate for oneself. Moreover, effects of trauma can be compounded by cultural contexts that ascribe to gender norms that oppress individual potential, and, as such, encouraging empowerment in these young women was a critical component to their success.

The SOL family identified personal development and restoration as necessary mechanisms for the survival and success of young women in its agency in addition to more concrete skills such as budget management. Perhaps due in part to the economic and political context of the Philippines (e.g., impoverishment, armed conflict, natural disasters), there are fewer social safety nets to ensure that high-risk youth achieve independence in a healthy and safe manner compared to more

developed countries, such as the United States. Thus, fostering personal development in young women may serve as a protective factor for future adversities.

Limitations

A number of steps were taken to enhance credibility and trustworthiness; however, this exploratory study is not without limitations. First, the sample size of the graduate focus group served as a major limitation. Because many graduates of the program had moved to other islands or cities after completing the program, it was difficult to recruit a larger sample. Conducting a focus group with so few graduates likely limited access to individual voices and perspectives and was insufficient for saturation (i.e., a point at which no new information can be gleaned from additional interviews or focus groups). Second, the focus groups were conducted in English. If the focus group had been conducted in Tagalog, the native language of the Philippines, the data may have been richer. Third, the focal agency selected voluntary adolescents who were best suited for their program (e.g., more advanced emotional development, motivated, driven). As such, the results may not be transferrable to programs that work with referred clients or clients with lower levels of emotional readiness. Fourth, although women in the exploratory study represented 1 to 7 years post-graduation, these results cannot be directly linked to these youth's development over time. Finally, the data gathered during the participant observation was limited to the current cohort and graduates who returned to the program on the weekends. If the first author had been exposed to all graduates of the program, distinctions in the themes (e.g., sense of belonging) may have emerged.

Practice Implications and Future Research

The School of Life program prepared young women with traumatic histories for adulthood by developing their psycho-emotional-spiritual wellbeing, cultivating a fighting spirit, and enhancing their financial stability. These preliminary findings suggest that ILPs in other parts of the world emphasize similar and distinct areas of personal development, skills, and knowledge compared to those in the United States. While this study was exploratory, the results suggest that practitioners working with young women in transitional living programs (e.g., group homes, ILPs) should foster areas of personal development, such as spirituality, in addition to concrete skill development. Notably, the theme “cultivating a fighting spirit” may lend itself towards the concept of “grit,” defined as the perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth et al. 2007). Although “grit” has been primarily researched in educational settings, ILPs may consider cultivating qualities in youth that encourage “grit,” such as a

fighting spirit, particularly with youth presenting with histories of trauma in which compensatory effects may be more evident. Additionally, these results suggest that financial security among youth transitioning into independent living remains a challenge. Considering these results in conjunction with extant literature (e.g., Casey et al. 2010), ILPs may need to reconsider the current standards of financial preparation for youth in their programs.

Nevertheless, these findings are exploratory and additional research must be conducted with other ILPs in Asian countries to confirm or expand the findings before any strong conclusions can be drawn. For example, future studies should include larger sample sizes and longitudinal research designs to better understand how Psycho-Emotional-Spiritual Wellbeing (particularly spirituality), Cultivating a Fighting Spirit (e.g., empowerment and grit), and Financial Security (e.g., new or improved financial preparatory models) contributes to youth outcomes over time. Also, future studies should be conducted with larger, more diverse samples of youth graduates to achieve saturation and illuminate concordance and discordance across study findings. Finally, researchers should examine other subgroups such as young men. Adolescents aging out of care are a growing concern, and many countries are turning to ILPs as a means to serve these high-risk youth. As such, further research on the programmatic processes of ILPs in other countries is warranted.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Authors Laura Voith and Joan Blakey, declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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