Narratives of survival and growth of rape survivors in the Northern Cape

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has one of the highest incidences of rape globally, highlighting the urgent need for social work research in addressing this critical issue. In this article the authors present the narratives of survival and growth of rape survivors in the Northern Cape, supplemented by narratives of significant people who provided support. Employing a strengths perspective and bioecological approach, the study enables social workers to focus on the inherent strengths and post-traumatic growth of rape survivors as well as on their contexts. Utilising a qualitative descriptive design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with rape survivors and their indicated significant others, complemented by visual data-collection strategies, timeline mapping and a visual metaphor. Thematic analysis of the data indicated post-rape challenges, adjustment and growth. Key findings included non-constructive coping, such as substance abuse and on-going challenges with the justice and police systems. Conversely, findings also underscored constructive coping, post-traumatic growth, and the value of spirituality, religion and social support.

Keywords: post-traumatic growth; rape; rape survivor; sexual violence; trauma; visual data collection

INTRODUCTION

Rape is a global issue with significant implications for affected individuals, their families, and society. South Africa has one of the highest incidences of rape in the world (Bridger, 2024; Buiten & Naidoo, 2016). Because of the complex processes around disclosure and reporting of rape (Johnson & Lewis, 2023), the actual number of incidents may be significantly higher than official records indicate.

Rape is linked to challenges to hegemonic masculinity (patriarchal and heteronormative) in a society increasingly recognising women's and LGBTQI+ rights (Westman, 2022). Choate (2023, p. 95) describes sexual trauma as a "gendered experience" highlighting that women are significantly more likely to be victims compared to men. Westman (2022) refers to the social and symbolic positioning of women within a heteropatriarchal society, which makes especially black lesbian women vulnerable to rape. Since 2017, the #MeToo movement has provided a platform for many victims of gender issues, sexual violence and rape to come forward and share their stories (Choate, 2023; Schwarz et al., 2022). Additionally, individuals with disabilities and those who identify with diverse sexual orientations, including nonbinary and transgender individuals, are more vulnerable to sexual trauma, underscoring the complex interplay of gender and victimisation. South Africa's high levels of rape can also be attributed to a complex history marked by division, discrimination and apartheid, alongside socio-political aspects that continue to influence the present landscape (Bridger, 2024).

Rape has complex and multifaceted effects and there are many complexities around disclosure processes (Madonsela-Letanka et al., 2024). Myths such as "women are to blame for rape", "they exaggerate and lie", and "their symptoms aren't serious" exacerbate the symptoms and reactions of rape survivors (Bridger, 2024, p. 2). In addition to the stories of survival, which encompass the struggles and challenges faced after experiencing rape, this study focused on stories of growth, and how rape survivors moved "beyond trauma's crushing grip" (Gordon, 2019, p. 293).

To provide effective and sensitive trauma-informed social work, awareness of rape trauma and the effects on victims should be mainstreamed into all aspects of social work practice (Leary & Hay, 2019). In alignment with this focus, the aim of this research was to qualitatively explore the narratives of survival and growth of rape survivors in the Northern Cape, as well as to explore and describe the views of significant others on the survival and growth of rape survivors. Two participant groups were therefore included. Willan et al. (2024) stress that the narratives of rape survivors should be heard to inform social work practice. To ensure the inclusion of their voices, the study was guided by the research questions: What are the narratives of survival and growth of rape survivors in the Northern Cape? What will the significant others reveal about the survival and growth of rape survivors in the Northern Cape? The study is grounded in bioecological theory and the strengths perspective, which are discussed briefly. This is followed by an overview of the research methodology, presentation of the findings, discussion and conclusion.

BIOECOLOGICAL THEORY

Human development is shaped by intricate interactions and processes between people and their environments (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020; Teater, 2024). Levers (2024) posits that trauma is a systemic phenomenon, shaped and influenced by interactions and relationships within and between the various systems within which those affected by trauma operate. Van der Merwe (2024) emphasises a shift toward understanding trauma responses from a growth-oriented and meaning-making perspective rather than pathologizing such reactions. In the aftermath of rape, significant personal development is needed for rape survivors to obtain a new equilibrium and recognise growth aspects. Such processes of adaptation and post-traumatic growth is fundamentally situated within the relational and systemic contexts that influence individuals (Berger, 2015). Central to this process are synergistic proximal processes and contextual factors, those transformative relationships and experiences that foster growth (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

The interest of this study in narratives of survival and growth aligns with the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model of the bioecological approach, taking into account the "synergistic and interrelated influences" of the person, proximal processes, context and time (Navarro et al., 2022, p. 234). Significant others identified by rape survivors participated in the study, providing perceived social support within reciprocal positive proximal processes.

Historical factors, such as South Africa's violent past and intergenerational issues, are relevant in the chronosystem (time aspect), influencing feelings about events in the past, present and envisaged future. Contextual factors, such as poverty, also play a role (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016). Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020) outline the negative effects of damaging reciprocal interactions or inverse proximal processes. In the context of rape, this implies blaming, shaming, stigma within the microsystem and negative or non-responses from authorities who should hear and protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. The bioecological theory serves as a comprehensive framework for this study. The theory highlights the influence of both positive and negative proximal processes, with a strong focus on contextual aspects. In the context of rape, chronosystem-related historical factors related to the individual and broader society, and the focus on individual functioning, provided an all-encompassing lens for this study.

STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

According to Kondrat (2024), scholars such as Saleebey, Rapp and Weick identified a need for a counter-movement to the more traditional problem-focused way of working in social work practice. In response, these authors developed the "strengths perspective" which aims to equalise the power relations between clients and social workers, allowing clients to take an active role in decisions about their own lives and interventions. A basic premise of the strengths perspective is the focus on individuals identifying their assets, strengths, positive characteristics and personal resources. The strengths perspective does not overlook the challenges individuals face; rather it seeks a balanced approach that weighs what is not working against what is beneficial, strong and effective (Kondrat, 2024). Saleebey's (2013) core principles of the strengths perspective emphasise the existence of strengths and resources within the various systems where individuals operate. In this context, Kondrat (2024) identifies

several sources of strength, such as spirituality, coping mechanisms, social networks, motivation and opportunities. Importantly, while this study highlights post-traumatic growth of rape survivors it does not negate the significant suffering endured by these individuals as captured in their stories of survival. Understanding the post-traumatic growth of rape survivors is essential for social workers and professionals in related fields, as it provides valuable insights for therapeutic interventions grounded in a strengths perspective

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Northern Cape does not have the highest incidence of reported rape in South Africa, with Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal having the highest incidence in 2022/2023 (Statista, 2023). However, rape still significantly impacts on people in the Northern Cape. The 1,096 cases reported in the Northern Cape Province (2022/2023) (Statista, 2023) do not reflect the many cases that were not reported. Johnson and Lewis (2023) outline various reasons for non-reporting of sexual assault cases such as shame and stigma, lack of trust in police, fear of harm from perpetrator, being under the influence of substances while being assaulted, and inability to remember details of the assault. Clearly, reported statistics does not reflect the true scale of the incidence of rape.

The research study was conducted in Kimberley and Upington. According to Statistics SA (2023), the Northern Cape population is 1.3 million people. The three areas in the Northern Cape with the highest population numbers are Kimberley with 225,155, Upington 67,581 and Postmasburg with 30,089 people. In the 2022 to 2023 period, there were 1,096 reported rape cases in the Northern Cape (Statista, 2024). Kimberley has an average of 70 reported rape cases per year, peaking at 91 in 2013/2014 (SAPS, 2020-21). Egenasi et al. (2024) researched rape patterns (where, when, how) of cases treated at a Kimberley hospital from January 2020 to December 2021. They found that violence was part of the rape incidents in more than half of the cases studied and that most of the rape victims knew the perpetrators. In the 2023 period, 75 cases of rape were reported in Kimberley (Institute for Security Studies, 2023). Upington averages between 26 and 39 rape cases per year. The incidence in these two towns is significantly higher than in smaller towns like Van Wyksvlei and Fraserburg, and even larger towns like Victoria West (National Crime Statistics 2023).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive design was used that aims to describe the phenomenon and its characteristics, adhering closely to the participants' own words (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Nassaji, 2015).

Sampling

The study had two population groups in the Northern Cape, namely survivors of rape (participant group 1) and significant others of survivors (participant group 2). Two towns were selected based on SAPS figures for reported rape, namely Kimberley and Upington. The population for this study included all genders and individuals from the age of 18 years and older who were either rape survivors or significant others of a rape survivor. Participants were identified by purposive sampling.

Rape survivors over 18 years were identified by the Department of Social Development (DSD). The inclusion criteria also required that participants participate in the study only a year after the rape incident and after they had received psychosocial support services. The significant others of the victims were identified by the rape survivors themselves. The inclusion criterion for significant others was that they provided face-to-face support to the survivors.

As the gatekeeper whose approval allows access to the research site (Grinnell & Unrau, 2021), the acting Head of Department, DSD, Northern Cape, provided legal authorisation for the research. The mediators were supervisors of the gender-based violence programmes from two departmental offices where participants were recruited. The mediators identified prospective participants, rape survivors, in Kimberley and Upington, and contacted prospective participants to provide information about the study and request permission for an independent person, a social auxiliary worker, to contact them. The social auxiliary worker had no links with DSD and nothing to gain by recruiting participants. There was no conflict of interest. The rape survivors were informed by the mediators and telephonically by an independent person that if they decided to participate, they had to identify a significant other person who had supported them through the rape trauma. Prospective participants had a week to decide about participation, after which the independent person contacted them again and if they agreed to participate, a meeting was scheduled with them and the identified significant other to go over the consent form and to sign it if they still wanted to take part. A date and location for the interviews were then set.

The sample consisted of six rape survivors and the six significant others identified by them. The rape survivors included two women in their 30s, three in their 20s, and one was 18 years old. The six rape survivors were all female. The significant others included two individuals in their 60s, one in their 50s and three in their 30s, five women and one man. Among the significant others were two mothers of rape survivors, as well as a friend, a boyfriend, an aunt and a social worker. Participants included Africans from the Zulu, Setswana and Sesotho culture, as well as coloured persons.

Table 1: **Demographic information of the two participant groups**

Code assigned	Age	Alleged perpetrator	Rape survivor/Significant other
P1A	36	Uncle	Rape survivor
P2A	55		Significant other: Friend
P1B	24	Unknown	Rape survivor
P2B	64		Significant other: Aunt
P1C	18	Unknown, although he lived close by	Rape survivor
P2C	39		Significant other: Mother
K1A	29	Boyfriend	Rape survivor
K2A	38		Significant other: Current boyfriend
K1B	35	Husband	Rape survivor
K2B	68		Significant other: Mother

| K1C | 26 | Unknown | Rape survivor |
| K2C | 32 | | Significant other: Social worker |

The alleged perpetrator who assaulted P1C lived on the same street, but she had never met him. K1C was raped by someone she asked for a lift on her way home. P1A knew the alleged perpetrator, because she grew up in his home. As a child, her uncle repeatedly sexually abused and raped her. K1A and her alleged perpetrator were in a relationship before the incident and had a child together. K1B was married to the alleged perpetrator.

Data collection and analysis

The participants from the two participant groups took part in individual semi-structured interviews. For rapes survivors, two visual data-collection strategies were employed as part of the semi-structured interview, namely timeline mapping and a metaphor of life as a fishbowl.

Timeline mapping as outlined by Basnet et al. (2023) allowed rape survivors to narrate their experiences over time to establish who the survivor was before and after the rape incident. Participants used A3 paper, colour pencils, and highlighters to illustrate key moments in their lives on the timeline.

The *Life as a fishbowl metaphor* is a visual data-collection strategy involving specific objects such as plastic fish, a glass bowl with water, ink and bleach (Van der Merwe, 2022). First used in practice and training by Van der Merwe in 2013, the technique was later applied by Ridgway (2013) in research on adolescent self-injury (Perold et al., 2015). The metaphor of the fishbowl allowed rape survivors to highlight the negative aspects that pollute the fishbowl and endanger the fish. With every negative aspect mentioned, a drop of ink was added to the fishbowl, turning the water dark purple. Then, positive aspects that promote survival and growth of rape survivors were explored; each positive aspect mentioned led to a drop of bleach being added to the fishbowl. The transformative effect of bleach on the ink lightened the water's colour. The fishbowl metaphor has proven to be a valuable data-collection strategy, facilitating the exploration of both negative and positive aspects of survival and growth after rape trauma, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Participant group 2: Significant others

An interview guide was used in the semi-structured interviews for the significant others, with questions asked by the researcher on several key areas, namely their relationship with the rape survivor, the rape survivor's life before the rape, changes in the rape survivor after the event, the influence of the rape on the rape survivor's life, the type of support the significant other provided, and adversity and growth after the incident.

All interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. The misconception that thematic analysis is a highly structured and rigid methodology is debunked by Braun and Clarke (2022), who present it as a non-linear, organic method for distilling data into themes, emphasising the demands of "scholarship, reflexivity, and creativity" as well as "theoretical engagement". The final "analytic purpose" is termed the construction of themes by Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 5).

Ethics

The approval by the ethics committee indicated that the participants were considered a medium-risk group due to the positive focus of the research and the fact that the specifics of the rape would not be discussed. However, given the sensitivity of the topic, a counsellor was available for follow-up services. None of the participants used this referral option as all of them had already received services from the Department of Social Development. The vulnerability of the participants was addressed by identifying possible harm and risks, and having precautionary measures in place to ensure the wellbeing of the participants. An independent person maintained contact with the participants after the interviews to provide referrals for free counselling, if psychosocial support were needed.

All protocols were followed to ensure participant privacy, anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Each participant was allocated a code to ensure anonymity, such as P1A for a rape survivor and P2A for a significant other linked to P1A. Interviews were conducted at the DSD offices in Upington and a church hall in Kimberley. The NWU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approved the study (NWU 00161-22-A1). Monitoring reports were submitted to HREC every six months.

Rigour and trustworthiness

Tracy (2010) regards the worthiness of the research topic as an important aspect to determine the trustworthiness of research. This study addresses a worthy topic that holds the potential to inform social work practice in highly constructive ways. This study, by reflecting the voices of people directly affected by rape and their significant others, contributes to a better understanding of the post-rape adjustment period, and the difficult process of growing and adapting after such trauma. To enhance the credibility of the study, verbatim participant quotes are incorporated to convey the stories of growth and survival of participants. This research does not claim to be transferable and is limited by the number of 6 rape victims and their 6 significant others. However, as indicated by Tisdell et al. (2025), transferability would depend on the reader and their experience of the findings, and how they are able to transfer them to either their own personal experience or work setting. To enhance dependability the data collection strategies have been clearly described and could be replicated.

FINDINGS

Two themes and corresponding sub-themes outlined in Table 2 highlight the narratives of survival and growth of rape survivors. Theme 1 encompasses the post-rape challenges, adjustments and growth of rape survivors. Theme 2 highlights the support received by rape survivors. These findings are supported by data collected from significant others who played a role in the survivors' lives.

Table 2: **Themes and sub-themes**

Theme 1	Sub-theme
Post-rape challenges, adjustment and growth	1.1. Non-constructive coping 1.2. Post-traumatic reactions 1.3. Challenges with the justice and police systems 1.4. Constructive coping 1.5. Post-traumatic growth 1.6. Spirituality and religion
Theme 2	**Sub-theme**
Support	2.1. Support from family 2.2. Support from friends and partners 2.3. Support from official sources

Theme 1: Post-rape challenges, adjustment and growth

The emotional recovery process after traumatic experiences can be full of obstacles and difficult to manage. Participants discussed non-constructive coping, post-traumatic reactions and struggles with the police and justice systems as part of their quest for survival.

The journey to integrate traumatic experiences into a functional lifestyle once again is not a linear progression, but rather a slow process characterised by progress and setbacks, alongside coping with the enduring symptoms of trauma (Welsh, 2018). Constructive coping, personal strengths, post-traumatic growth, spirituality and religion were core features in the growth of participants. The focus will first be on non-constructive coping.

Non-constructive coping

According to Lyons (2023), coping mechanisms can aim to numb extreme stress. Rape survivors may resort to maladaptive coping strategies while struggling to process trauma. Rape survivors often struggle to accept the consequences and adverse effects of rape and attempt to escape through self-mutilation, substance abuse or suicide (Choate, 2023). Salman et al. (2017) assert that suicide is a global health crisis, with mental illness, aggressive and impulsive personality traits, and a sense of isolation and alienation, significantly increasing the risk for suicide. Participant P1A attempted to commit suicide multiple times and said:

> *To go through rape is not easy. I started drinking. I drank a lot. I tried to kill myself more than once.*

P1A and K1C talked about their suicide attempts and ideation after the traumatic event.

Mellen and Hatzenbuehler (2023) connect disclosure issues with stigma. As K1C noted, when rape survivors do not disclose their experiences to those within their microsystems, their behaviour and emotions may be misconstrued. K1C, who did not disclose the rape to her family, felt misunderstood by them because they were unaware of what she was going through. K1C said:

> *I did not tell anyone in the house. Yeah, my mom, my brother, sometimes if I have that, thinks I made a mistake* [referred to days where she was not coping], *sometimes they would shout at me.* (K1C)

Goldstone et al. (2018) allude to the link between substance use and an increased risk of suicide. P1A, a survivor of child sexual abuse who endured abuse and rape for most of her childhood, turned to alcohol abuse and engaged in sexual acts in exchange for money and goods. P1A is a religious person who is persistently plagued by intrusive thoughts of doing something sinful. However, she constantly questions God about her living circumstances, past experiences and lack of employment as reflected in the following statement:

> *Alcohol brought me peace. I wanted to live. Until today, if I go out, I want my pleasure. I still want my pleasure. With this pleasure, I feel that I want to live.* (P1A)

Engaging in sex for money meets subsistence needs. However, such practices could be an example of inverse proximal processes that can be damaging (Navarro et al., 2022) and objectify P1A even more, after a lifetime of abuse.

> *That* [sex work] *is ungodly and when there's nothing on the table to eat and when you approach me. I never knew that a person could sell their souls. So, when you offer me a 200 rand or 500 rand, that would mean that I'm selling myself. But who would say no? You would take it, because you're hungry. I will take it! I would ask the Lord – there is scripture in Matthew 12 verse 36 where the Lord speaks about the sinful things that we do.* (P1A)

P1A had conflicting feelings about this practice of sex work for money, as it provided food, but conflicted with her religious belief system.

Post-traumatic reactions

Trauma resulting from rape, sexual assault and sexual abuse can have life-altering consequences (Piggott & Anderson, 2022; Salman et al., 2017). Rape is a stigmatised form of trauma (Choate, 2023; Mellen & Hatzenbuehler, 2023). Victims of rape often exhibit complex and multifaceted reactions, including fear, sexual dysfunction and limitations in their daily activities. P1C, for example, was raped by an unknown person she recognised from her neighbourhood, but did not know personally. Since the rape incident, she has developed a pervasive fear of going out. On occasions when she does leave her home and sees him approaching, she alters her route to avoid him. Her fear stemmed from the actual traumatic experience and encountering the perpetrator is as a constant reminder of the traumatic event, as evidenced by the following statement:

> *I always walk up and down, but not in our street. The fact that I have to see the man each and every day, because we're living in one street* [she mentioned that he stays in the next street but roams around in their street]. *I don't walk around a lot. And when I do and he approaches, I cross the road and after seeing him, then it somehow takes me a while to, again, go out into the streets.* (P1C)

Intrusive thoughts, anxiety, flashbacks, avoidance and aversion to situations reminiscent of the trauma are common post-traumatic reactions (Choate, 2023; Salman et al., 2017). Rape survivors often face a wide array of psychological consequences, including anger, aggression, hostility, guilt, shame and stigma, self-blame, doubt, low self-esteem, grief, sadness and trauma triggers (Choate, 2023). K1C experienced reactions such as intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, stigma, discrimination and anxiety. A direct trigger she identified was the sight of a white car, like that of the alleged perpetrator:

He drove a white car. You know if I take a walk and I see the same car as the perpetrator, it triggers me.

For K1C, the ongoing "*what if*" speculation and uncertainty were unsettling. However, despite all her hardships, she found motivation in her son's life, which ultimately stopped her from committing suicide.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I commit suicide that time and how it would have affected my son. Maybe he would have continuously asked "where is my mom?" I feel like, God, maybe I might kill myself, but the only thing that prevent or stop me trying to kill myself is my son. I even told my friend that if I was not having this child, I would have been dead by now. (K1C)

P1B spoke of her brokenness after the rape, and her statement illustrates how memories of trauma can feel painfully recent. She said:

I was experiencing trauma, and I felt I was at breaking point after that incident. I came to realise how it really feels to be broken, and that's why I found myself broken. I can still see the event, as bright as daylight inside of me. (P1B)

P1A experienced sexual difficulties when she had sexual intercourse with her boyfriend:

I don't feel like a woman! Let me put it this way, I feel dead. If I want to have sexual intercourse, I would not have an orgasm because I don't know it, because I was robbed from that. (P1A)

People are affected by trauma in many ways. Some are resilient, while others have setbacks before getting better. At the exosystem level, these individuals may be referred to overburdened social services and health care providers, who may be unable to offer them appropriate intervention, particularly if they require enrolment in a substance abuse recovery programme.

Challenges with the police and justice systems

Participant K1B shared her experience with the South African Police Service (SAPS) and how insensitively they handled her rape case. K1B said that she acted in self-defence and fought back, and the perpetrator then filed domestic violence charges against her. The inhumane and undignified treatment caused K1B to lose respect for the police system.

I even showed the one female officer my bruises. And he [alleged perpetrator] *had no physical visible bruises on him. I went and showed them; this is my bruise. This is what I have from what this matter* [man] *has done to me. Still, they kept me in police custody for*

two nights. In my pains, where I had private part pains, where I had been kicked in the stomach. They still decided that we want to do our job. That was their words that we just doing our job? Even if they don't see the facts that are in front of them, they just want to do their jobs. Yeah. I don't have any respect for them. I really don't. (K1B)

K1A said she had to provide information to SAPS, but they were still unable to respond to her questions adequately.

And at the police, okay, like, they are bad, bad, bad. Because they don't come to tell, no, we've got this information, we've got that information. I always have to go to them and ask them how far you guys with the case what, what, what, what. (K1A)

South Africa's National Prosecuting Authority (NPA, 2022), a major role player in the country's criminal justice system, ensures that those who commit crimes are charged and held accountable. The NPA is responsible for ensuring that credible evidence is presented to the court to prosecute an offender. The backlog of sexual offence cases in South Africa is one of the greatest challenges experienced by the NPA. Another obstacle to prosecution is that many offenders are unknown to the victims and practically impossible to identify without credible evidence. This has an even greater impact on police investigations and the quest for credible evidence to support a case in court (NPA, 2024). Similarly, in the 2021/2022 judicial report presented by Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, he indicated that courtroom shortages, lack of judges, faulty court recording technology, power outages (loadshedding) and natural disasters affecting lower-level courts are the main causes of the backlog in South Africa. Additionally, the failure to appoint additional judges to more courts dealing with sexual offences has exacerbated South Africa's rape case backlog (Makhafola, 2023).

The delays in policing and prosecution of rape perpetrators cause rape victims to distrust the South African legal system. Some participants (K1C, P1B, and P1C) have come to terms with the fact that the alleged offenders are unknown and are now concentrating on their own healing processes. P1A is dissatisfied with the legal system and feels almost compelled to take matters into her own hands. P1A believes that she will be able to process her intense feelings of hatred and rage once she has received justice:

That my life is not clean. That I have not received the justice that I deserve [for her rape case] *and, as a result, my fish tank is still polluted* [metaphor used in the interview]. *I didn't get closure as yet because the paedophile is still free wherever he is. I am not healed as yet, and I'm still striving so that justice can be served. If I see that the perpetrator is brought to justice then automatically my fish tank would be clean and I would be able to ensure, slowly but surely, my fish tank becomes clean. I will be able to work through the anger and the hatred. My life is still polluted because I haven't received justice. I'm still severely impacted by what happened to me.* (P1A)

Despite the delays in her court case, P1B still believes that the alleged perpetrator will one day be brought to justice:

The message I got from Social Development was the fact that they still stand behind people, and the same applies with the police officials, is that they are still supporting people…The court cases are just coming. Uhm, it just follows, one another and it just feels a lot.

P1B indicated that the ongoing court case caused stress, although she had a strong conviction to see it through.

Constructive coping

Individuals often rely on their inner strengths to navigate difficulties, trials and tribulations. Constructive coping can involve building on these strengths and finding comfort, meaning and purpose in their efforts to survive the rape trauma. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) had already highlighted key coping elements, namely that people strive to deal cognitively and behaviourally with internal and external challenges perceived as overwhelming and beyond their existing resources. Personal agency and autonomy, emotion regulation and meaning-making support constructive coping (Paivio, & Angus, 2020; Williams & Poijula, 2016). The significant other of K1A said:

I told her [K1A] *to live her life to the fullest, lift her head up high. Face every challenge that life throws at her, and she did.* (K2A)

The participants focused on their inner strengths rather than their problems or deficiencies. K1B and K1C recognised their talents, which helped them to overcome their trauma.

Post-traumatic growth

Trauma permanently alters a person's life, but also provides opportunities for transformation and meaningful change. According to Wade et al. (2017), post-traumatic growth involves finding meaning in traumatic events. Growth can manifest in self-perception, life appreciation, new possibilities and priorities, deeper interpersonal relationships, altered life philosophy, a re-evaluation of religion and spirituality, and expanded inner strength (Berger, 2015; Choate, 2023; Gordon, 2019; Potgieter & Botha, 2020). Pointing to post-traumatic growth and a survivor mission, K1C occasionally writes scripts and aims to become a professional scriptwriter to share her story and help others avoid similar experiences.

I wish to be a scriptwriter. I want to be a script writer. Uh, in future I wish to use my story to be a movie, or a drama and I want to encourage some other women because they will get in this situation that I got in and would want to commit suicide. Some others, they even end up in drugs. I wish to in course of time to make or create a group that will support the women. To prevent women and children abuse or even other people who gets abuse as me to be inspired by my story, that it is not the end of life. (K1C)

P1B also described a survivor mission:

And I will personally make it a point to assist the police … should there be any cases of, uhm, rape so that those people [perpetrators] *can be brought to the book and so that our communities can be much safer.* (P1B)

Johnston and Tarvydas (2023) highlight the value of establishing a survivor mission, where survivors of trauma engage in social action and support within various systems, aiming to raise awareness about their experiences. Despite violations of their human rights and dignity that caused significant pain and suffering, the participants maintained the will to live. P1B illustrated the slow process of growth as follows:

So, it really took me some time to grow in certain aspects and to be able to stand up for myself". (P1B)

P2B, the significant other of P1B, added that being present, paying attention and believing in herself had a beneficial effect on the growth that was seen in P1B.

There was indeed a positive change, because there was someone that listened to me. There was someone who was there for me, and there's someone who believed me. It's impossible for a person to sit with something so big and not to be believed because why, just why would one person just fabricate a story and, just drop a bomb on another person? So yes, there was definitely positive change because, I stood by her side when she told me. There were days where she felt a bit pissed. But I, was able to motivate her, because I'm a religious person. (P2B)

The support from P2B had a positive effect on P1A, motivating her to open a case against the alleged perpetrator and occasionally attend church to connect with God.

P1B was proud that she stood up for herself, enforcing her human rights and opening a case. She said that she was "*speaking on behalf of those individuals that cannot speak up for themselves; at the end it was a success*".

According to P2A, P1A demonstrated a favourable change in behaviour and became more responsible by asserting her independence and making her own life choices. This transformation occurred after the unconditional support that was provided to P1A and the encouragement to report the alleged perpetrator.

Um, so there is positive change that took place. The fact that she has her own place goes to show how independent she is; she stays alone. She moved out of her mother's house and, now where she is currently, she is on her own. So, if she wanted to kill herself, she would've done that a long time ago. That also goes to show that she wants to live, that now she wants to live. (P2A)

For participants like K1B, discussing their survival triggered critical thinking and aligned with the study's aim of enabling participants to narrate their stories of survival and growth assisted by visual data-collection strategies. K1B mentioned that she does not know how she survived after the rape incident.

I really don't know how I even survived. I don't know. But you grew, but I grew, and I became a little cheekier. Yes, there is growth that took place because I'm not trying to sound insensitive, but there's people who probably wouldn't have survived what I went through. Unexplained sturdiness of not losing my mind. That one for me is the biggest one. I never lost my mind. Yeah. You know? Um, so yes, there is growth. (K1B)

K1B, an artist, found that acting and storytelling allowed her to confront her experiences and express herself more honestly.

> *Absolutely it has because* [the participant explained how acting helped her]*, previously when the abuse started happening, um, there was another company that I was working for, for the same initiative. And we would do plays on gender-based violence and all of that stuff. And I found myself playing the character of the woman who's abused; actually, playing my real life. You know, and it helped me to, um, I don't know. There's just something that happens when you are a performer or an actress or whatever. You just, when you portray this, this thing that you are going through, it just becomes like a venting session. You know? Yeah. So, it helped*. (K1B)

For K1B, prioritising herself was essential because she needed to heal internally above all else.

> *I love myself now more than I ever loved myself. He wanted to destroy me, but, if anything, he gave me back my self-love. I chose to love myself now more. I've grown; I've really grown. I've matured in so many ways, and I know exactly what I want.* (K1B)

P1B valued her strength and independence even before the rape, highlighting her neatness and independence as strengths. K2A, the significant other of K1A, described her as honest and "*a fun person to be around*", also noting K1A's independence, hard work and friendliness. People who have experienced trauma often lose sight of their own potential and become stuck in despair. Making meaning from the trauma they have encountered is a slow process, but recognising their strengths and growth ultimately helps with trauma integration.

Spirituality and religion

According to Lepherd (2015), an individual's spirituality, which evolves over their lifespan, can undergo a transformative shift following traumatic experiences (Williams & Poijula, 2016). Adversity often leads individuals to reassess their lives; spirituality becomes a deeply personal aspect, shaped by factors such as ethnicity, culture and the systems in which they operate. Rodgers (2014) suggests that connecting with a deity, a higher force or something sacred allows individuals to find meaning in painful or life-threatening events. Lepherd (2015, p. 567) describes spirituality as the "essence of a person," characterised by strong self-awareness. It reflects individuals' capacity to transcend their everyday selves, facilitating personal growth and transformation after trauma.

All 12 participants identified as Christians, some having a strong sense of spirituality and actively engaging in religious practices. In contrast, however, Piggott and Anderson (2022) found that changes occurred in the religious behaviour in persons who experienced rape in that they were less likely to maintain their previous religious affiliations, less inclined to read scriptures and attend church services. Rather than turning to faith for support, these individuals may distance themselves from their faith communities.

A person is a component of a microsystem with certain characteristics and beliefs. These personal attributes, along with influences from their immediate systems, guide their interactions within the mesosystem, such as joining a religious group to nurture their spirituality. The mesosystem facilitates interactions between a family and a religious

institution, providing the rape survivor with spiritual support and direction (Crawford, 2020). P1A shared that her significant other introduced her to God and the church. Although she does not attend church frequently, she continues to connect with God through prayer and Bible study.

> *I did not get involved in any activities, but I started going to church. When my mamani* [aunt] *told them about my situation, she asked for a prayer. That's when I met the pastor and started opening up about what happened to me. I attended church now and then.* (P1A)

P1A mentioned that she later attended church less frequently as she did not have enough suitable clothing. Despite this, she found the sermons delivered at church to be relatable and meaningful, resonating with her life experiences.

> *When you attend church, the pastor often preaches a sermon that speaks to you. Church is good for a person and it's very relieving; you see things with a sober mind, and you approach things differently. So church is basically a place where you can move out of your pressing situation. It is a place that can heal your wounds. I don't attend church regularly, that's why there's still ups and downs in my life, but church is the best place where you can unpack things.* (P1A)

In contrast to the above, Piggott and Anderson (2022, p. 3883) discuss the "fraught relationship between religiosity and sexuality" following rape. They explain that Christian teachings can sometimes portray women as "scheming and seductive", referring to stories of false rape accusations (for example, Potiphar's wife) and emphasising virginity, which can alienate rape victims from the church. P1A grappled with many questions about God's plan for her life, feeling frustrated as things did not unfold as she had hoped. Despite graduating from high school and earning a certificate, she continued to struggle to find work, leading her to question God's love for her amid ongoing challenges. This highlights that developing a meaningful connection with a higher power or something sacred is often difficult and fraught with challenges, yet these challenges can ultimately contribute to personal growth.

K1B expressed gratitude to God for guiding her path and bringing light into her life. She believed that God had supported her throughout her entire struggle, asserting that God allowed these events to happen to free her from an unhealthy and abusive relationship.

> *It's like when God wants me, he wanted me to get extremely hurt so that I can actually face the reality that you are not in a good relationship. So yeah, the character* [referring to the character of her husband] *just gave me a rude awakening.* (K1B)

The extent to which participants felt connected to their spirituality could facilitate channels for processing and generating meaning, potentially influencing changes in behaviour and cognitive patterns. Although two participants found their connection to spirituality positive, this does not necessarily mean that religion and spirituality were the primary factors contributing to their positive outlook on life.

THEME 2: SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support emerges within meaningful relationships, which are bonds between people and proximal processes that serve specific functions, fostering a sense of closeness and strong connectedness (Mertika et al., 2020). Block et al. (2022) highlight that meaningful relationships have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals.

Support from family

For some participants, such as K1B, immediate support was always available because she shared a home with her mother, K2B, who was indicated as her significant other in this research. According to Block et al. (2022), people need a sense of belonging, acceptance and being respected, along with having the space to share feelings. For K1B, the home environment served as a safe haven where she experienced a sense of belonging and freedom.

> *It was only God's grace, my mom's support, you know. When the incident happened and I came home, I remember crying about it and she moved out of her bedroom and she said, you know what? Come sleep in my bed because she's got a nice, comfortable bed. In big room and whatnot. So, she's like, no, you can sleep now here. Because she knows how I love her room. So, she moved out and she slept in the other room in my brother's room. And she just was amazing support structure in everything that I need. She is there, you know? If I need to even have five seconds for myself and just recuperate and just have some fresh air. And she's there with my children, being a grandmother, the best grandmother that she can be. She doesn't allow me to go deep into depression.* (K1B)

In addition to the above, K1B expanded on the strong support she received from her mother:

> *She showed me from a very young age what support is. Even when I was pregnant with my first-born daughter, she was not thrilled because I was not even barely done with school. But she raised the child, she supports. Even now, this child, we live with her now, she's still supporting. You know, she's on pension right now. We are trying to hustle my brother and I, but she still has that thing of I must look after my kids. So, she's the epitome of what support should look like for people.* (K1B)

Affection, friendship, care, interest, love and confidence are all forms of social support that people provide to one another through dynamic interactions within proximal processes in the microsystem (Navarro et al., 2022). For rape survivors, interactions with significant others (family, friends or boyfriends) in their immediate environments can offer protection and support, or be typified by anger, resentment and rejection.

Support from friends and partners

P1A was raped by her uncle from a very young age for many years and she had no one to disclose to. P1A lacked a strong support system but had to support her sisters. She eventually disclosed to a family friend who created a safe space for her. The following comment shows how difficult it was to disclose:

That's when I went to my mamani [aunt] *and told her that my uncle wanted to sleep with me as grown as I was. I literally had to hold my heart. To tell her this because it wasn't easy. But she told me to feel free and that she would take it as it comes.* (P1A)

Following the rape incident, K1C confided in a friend, who subsequently provided emotional support.

My friend encouraged me a lot. Yes. OK. She told me that you don't do that [commit suicide]. *You have a son and mom. I love you always my friend. She is my strength and pillar. Yeah, she's everything to me. She is very supportive to me.*

Having that person to talk to, yeah, it's good to have them because I am able to confide in someone. She called me yesterday which was Friday to tell me that we are going out. Yes, we are going out on Sunday. (K1C).

K1A's boyfriend supported her in many ways. He used humour saying: "*I just make her laugh. Yeah, yeah, I'm a jokey person. I try to make her happy*".

P1C is a very quiet and reserved person, but she and her same-sex partner have a close and emotionally supportive relationship that she describes as follows:

Um, she sits next to me, we cried together and, she encouraged me to say that we are going to get through this. So, from day one on, she's been really supportive. I think it's really nice to have someone that supports you, that stands by your side. It really means a lot for a person. (P1C)

According to Block et al. (2022), meaningful relationships allow individuals to disclose certain events, request advice, or help when needed. Participants reported that their survival and growth were greatly impacted by their relationships with significant others. The support provided a space for them to be vulnerable and to be heard.

Welsh (2018) and Gordon (2019) refer to the dichotomy created by trauma, in which people tend to isolate and discount their need for social connection just when they need it the most. In the systems where the participants functioned, other family members in their homes also experienced stressors associated with poverty and violence. K2A noted that the relationship of his girlfriend (K1A) with her family deteriorated after the rape because of rejection from her family. Family relationships were complicated and not all participants found support at home.

K1C wanted to spare her mother, who had health problems, the stress of knowing about the rape. Aside from the social worker, K1C only told her friend and ex-boyfriend about the incident.

Till today she [mother] *doesn't know. I didn't want to tell because I was afraid of her health. I didn't want her to get sick because I know that she was going to get sick. Life goes on. Yes. It's done. Life will go on.* (K1C)

P1B valued relationships as a strength before the incident and said her strength lies in people, "*because without people you do not have a lot to depend on*". She later described her aunt and mother as strong pillars in her immediate or microsystem. The interview with her aunt (P2B)

revealed that the family relationships were not always supportive and good. There were times of turmoil and conflict in the family. P1B referred in this regard to the inability of family members to support each other: "*But at this point I feel like we are just bleeding on each other*". She also stated that the family in the household lived in isolation, which implied limited support from other social networks, such as friends. Despite these relationship problems, P1B's aunt remained by her side and provided support. It was also evident that providing support could be taxing for significant others. K2A described his hypervigilance and the effort to keep K1A safe – the alleged perpetrator had lured the survivor to his place and had tried to slit her throat:

> *Now it presses me, because now everywhere she goes, I have to know. Where she's going, what time she'll be back, who's going to be there? Because remember what happened?* (K2A)

Those who have received emotional support or know that it is available are more likely to thrive. Supported people appear to be happier, healthier and better equipped to face challenges, worry and the pain and sadness that come with life's setbacks. Lack of social support and stigmatisation are associated with inverse proximal processes, which have a detrimental impact on a person's mental and emotional wellbeing.

Support from official sources

The difficulties associated with formal structures such as the SAPS have previously been highlighted. In contrast, some participants reported obtaining good external support. The Department of Social Development, the Department of Education and SAPS all provided substantial support to P1B, who built relationships with officials while participating in programmes and initiatives. She acquired a strong ambition to work in the field of education and with children. Her experiences with these supportive people generated a passion for learning. P1B participated in a DSD programme that she regarded as providing "*immense support*".

> *I overcame my frustration, and I had people who surrounded me and who had a positive influence on my life and that was able to motivate me. And our institutions are also very involved, and they would never allow that a young person, would, you know, suffer, as a result of social ill in our communities. Our institutions are very much involved in ensuring that young people's lives are bigger and better. I came to discover a bigger appreciation in the department, and that is what made me a more open person, socially open. I'm not where I want to be, but I am much better than the way I was.* (P1B)

The sessions facilitated by social workers included dealing with emotions, which increased P1B's self-confidence and provided her with the tools she needed to manage her emotions. It enabled her to perceive the love and care of others, feel their compassion for her, and have a sense of community.

On an exosystem level, a professional social worker provided social work services to ensure that K1C fulfils her potential as she did before the incident, as well as providing her with social and emotional support. The participant identified the social worker as her significant other (K2C), who stated:

This, the sessions, are mainly focused on her as a survivor who went through sexual or/and physical abuse. Basically, in the sessions they shared their experiences, and we also focused on coping skills, how to deal with their emotions, flashbacks, and anxiousness. (K2C)

P1B also acknowledged the help her social worker provided.

It was a privilege to be part of our sessions, and I really felt privileged to be part of it. I previously had knowledge about what social workers does, but having that interaction, really made a difference. And I truly, really, are grateful for the insight that she has for this profession. (P1B)

The rape survivors who participated in this study all had valuable social connections, although they also felt misunderstood by others in their lives. Positive feedback on social work interventions, particularly the social work services at the Thuthuzela Care Centre, demonstrates that even in more rural areas there are services available for this vulnerable group.

DISCUSSION

The research study captured individual experiences and narratives that portrayed both the painful and positive realities of the participants. Traditionally, the social work profession has focused on identifying problems, addressing them, and then learning about other emerging problems. However, the strengths perspective, with a focus on what is working for an individual and emphasising their strengths, has also been inherently part of social work for decades (Kondrat, 2024; Van Breda & Nyoni, 2023). When working with rape survivors, applying a strengths perspective along with a bioecological approach enables social workers to focus not only on the inherent strengths of rape survivors and their post-traumatic growth, but also on the contexts in which they function. This dual focus brings to the forefront narratives of survival and growth. This approach aligns with Teater's (2024) assertion that social workers who employ a strengths perspective help clients to leverage their innate abilities, strengths, assets and accomplishments when addressing challenges. For rape survivors, discussing the traumatic incident can be therapeutic; however, emphasising their growth and survival enables them to see themselves and their lives from a new and empowering perspective.

Post-rape adjustment was impeded by non-constructive coping mechanisms, including self-harm, post-traumatic reactions, substance abuse and suicide attempts. Furthermore, systemic deficiencies within the justice and police systems exacerbated the challenges survivors faced. Issues such as the backlog within the NPA system and the treatment of rape survivors by SAPS not only hindered progress, but also subjected survivors to secondary trauma. Participants expressed deep concerns about the operation of the legal system. For victims of sexual assault, obtaining justice through the legal system and successfully prosecuting offenders is crucial to facilitate healing and adjustment. Role players must thus ensure that all alternatives are considered and explored before cases are rejected, and that wiping out backlog cases is expedited.

Local governments should take proactive steps to develop and implement policies that improve community safety. These policies should address a wide range of safety measures, from providing sufficient streetlights and safety patrols to offering comprehensive support to rape

victims. Additionally, healthcare facilities must comply with and improve existing protocols to ensure that victims of sexual assault receive timely, efficient and effective care. This includes the proper conduct of forensic assessments. These facilities should also adopt a trauma-informed care approach to better support the post-trauma integration processes of rape survivors.

More trauma research should focus on post-traumatic growth to empower and enable professionals to focus more on the strengths of their clients. Further research should focus on disclosure procedures and factors that support or hinder the reporting of rape. From the perspectives of rape survivors and their significant others, more research is needed on the stigma associated with rape. This study demonstrated the value of using the metaphor of the fishbowl and timeline mapping, which generated rich data. Consequently, more research should explore the use of visual data-collection techniques, particularly with vulnerable participants and within social work research. Further research is also warranted on the complexities around religion and spirituality in cases of trauma, especially where the value systems of rape survivors' conflict with their trauma-related acting-out behaviours, such as sexual promiscuity.

The experiences of rape survivors intersected with various ecological systems, spanning the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Within this complex network, the support of one or two people proved to have a significant impact on the lives of rape survivors. Meaningful relationships and emotional support created a safe space for rape survivors to be vulnerable, heard, cared for and accepted. These supportive and relationally grounded dynamics, fostered by individuals within their immediate environments, as well as formal support structures, played a key role in offering sanctuary to rape survivors. Significant others who participated in the study provided spaces conducive to disclosure, safety and non-judgemental understanding. However, it is important to acknowledge the emotional and psychological toll on these supportive figures. Their contributions to providing care and understanding are invaluable and should not be underestimated.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to two areas in the Northern Cape, which restricts the transferability of its findings. However, Tisdell et al. (2025) emphasise that small samples are not intended for generalisation, but rather to shed light on a specific phenomenon to gain a better understanding of it. Although the sample size was smaller than anticipated, it represents a vulnerable and hard-to-reach group. The rarely heard voices from these participants revealed specific themes that illuminated their stories of growth and survival. There were some indications of data saturation, such as repeated words and phrases.

Another limitation was that only female participants were included although the inclusion criteria allowed participation from males and LGBTQI+ persons. Further studies should focus on these groupings.

The fact that this study focused only on reported cases is a shortcoming.

CONCLUSION

The themes and sub-themes underlying the narratives of survival and growth depict a picture of post-rape adaptation. The article highlighted the efforts of the participants to navigate and survive the trauma. For some, survival entailed resorting to coping mechanisms such as excessive drinking, suicide attempts and selling sex, as well as seeking justice. For others, growth manifested in taking ownership of their lives, prioritising themselves, becoming independent, appreciating life, improving self-perception and discovering new possibilities. In conclusion, attention must be paid to the systems with which rape survivors engage, including social and health services, as well as justice and police systems. These systems should play a vital role in ensuring that rape survivors receive dignified, fair and unbiased services, which are essential for their trauma integration and growth.

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