

Research Paper

Understanding Post-Traumatic Growth Through the Narratives of Disaster Survivors

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ABSTRACT

Natural disasters often leave lasting psychological impacts on survivors. This qualitative empirical study explores post-traumatic growth (PTG) among flood survivors in India through the analysis of personal narratives. Using a narrative inquiry framework, ten participants shared their lived experiences of trauma, recovery, and transformation following major floods. Findings revealed key themes such as redefined life priorities, strengthened interpersonal relationships, spiritual deepening, and enhanced resilience. The results indicate that despite enduring significant distress, many survivors exhibited remarkable psychological adaptation and growth. The study underscores the importance of fostering meaning-making, community support, and culturally sensitive interventions to facilitate PTG in post-disaster contexts.

Keywords: *Post-Traumatic Growth, Flood Survivors, Trauma Narratives, Resilience, Natural Disasters*

Natural disasters are among the most devastating events faced by humanity, causing large-scale destruction, displacement, and profound psychological distress. India, with its geographical diversity and climatic variability, has experienced numerous floods that disrupt communities and lead to significant loss of life and property. Beyond the tangible damage, floods exert deep psychological effects, often leading to trauma, grief, and existential crises among survivors. However, research over the past two decades has also highlighted the phenomenon of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)—positive psychological change that occurs as individuals struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The current study aims to understand PTG through the lived narratives of flood survivors across India, exploring how individuals reconstruct meaning and rebuild their sense of self following disaster exposure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on trauma and recovery has evolved from a focus on pathology to an appreciation of resilience and growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) model of PTG outlines five domains: appreciation of life, relationships with others, new possibilities, personal strength, and spiritual change. Subsequent studies have shown that survivors of disasters often report a combination of distress and growth, suggesting that both can coexist (Linley & Joseph,

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Understanding Post-Traumatic Growth Through the Narratives of Disaster Survivors

2004). In the Indian context, studies on PTG among survivors of natural disasters remain limited, with most research focusing on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and coping mechanisms. Narrative approaches have been increasingly recognized as powerful tools to understand how survivors make sense of their traumatic experiences (Riessman, 2008). Narratives allow individuals to reframe suffering as an opportunity for transformation, thereby offering insight into culturally embedded pathways of healing.

METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of flood survivors. Ten participants (6 females, 4 males) aged between 25 and 55 years were recruited through purposive sampling from various flood-prone regions across India. Inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced a major flood within the past five years. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on themes such as personal loss, coping strategies, social support, and perceptions of change after the flood. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Data Analysis

Narrative data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The process involved multiple readings of transcripts, coding of recurrent patterns, and clustering of themes that reflected key aspects of post-traumatic growth. Reflexivity was maintained throughout analysis to minimize researcher bias. Emerging themes were verified through member checking and peer debriefing to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

RESULTS

Themes that originated were that of prioritizing one's own life values and gratitude towards life. Apart from those, participants showed emphasis on mutual support from community and stronger family bonds; enhanced resilience and becoming more self-reliant which emerged due to the tragedy faced by them, and lastly the most important theme that got reflected from these interviews were that of faith and spirituality to cope with the tragedy. These narratives demonstrate that the process of recovery extends beyond symptom reduction to encompass meaning reconstruction and identity reformation.

DISCUSSION

The findings support existing literature suggesting that trauma can catalyze positive psychological transformations. Participants' narratives align with Tedeschi and Calhoun's PTG framework, highlighting appreciation of life and spiritual growth as salient domains in the Indian context. Cultural factors, such as collectivism and religious beliefs, appeared to facilitate adaptive coping. Moreover, the role of social connectedness was evident, consistent with studies emphasizing community-based resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2007). While distress was a common starting point, the gradual reconstruction of meaning fostered emotional recovery and growth. This underscores the need for post-disaster interventions that go beyond trauma mitigation to include meaning-centred therapeutic approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the transformative potential inherent in survivors' narratives of trauma. Flood survivors in India not only endure immense loss but also reconstruct meaning and experience psychological growth. By foregrounding survivors' voices, this research contributes to a culturally grounded understanding of PTG in disaster contexts. Practitioners

Understanding Post-Traumatic Growth Through the Narratives of Disaster Survivors

and policymakers should prioritize psychosocial interventions that foster community rebuilding, collective resilience, and opportunities for meaning-making in post-disaster rehabilitation efforts.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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