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# Service Utilization, Perceived Changes of Self, and Life Satisfaction Among Women Who Experienced Intimate Partner Abuse: The Mediation Effect of Empowerment

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## Abstract

This study explored the growth experiences of women abused by their intimate partner, specifically focusing on the associations between social services and empowerment, perceived changes of self, and life satisfaction. The potential effects of demographic variables, social support, coping, and experience of partner abuse were also explored. A survey study was conducted through the collaboration of social workers in the Centers of Prevention and Intervention for Domestic Violence and private sectors in Taiwan. Through contact by their social workers, 191 participants completed the questionnaires. The results revealed that the participants had growth mainly in their psychological and interpersonal domains. The independent variables in the regression model explained 45.3% (adjusted) variance in perceived changes of self. In addition to empowerment and negative impact of violence, intensity

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of contact and professional relationship were two important service variables that directly and significantly correlated with perceived changes of self. A significant amount of variance (adjusted  $R^2 = .556$ ) in life satisfaction could be explained by the independent variables. Social support and empowerment directly correlated with life satisfaction. The findings also supported the mediation effect of empowerment. Seven variables (e.g., social support, coping method, and professional relationship) indirectly associated with perceived changes of self and life satisfaction through empowerment.

### **Keywords**

intimate partner abuse, perceived changes of self, life satisfaction, empowerment, recovery

### **Introduction**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been a social problem that has garnered public attention for the past three decades in the West and for the past decade in Taiwan, as the violence could result in both physical and emotional impairment to the victims. Much attention has been given to providing protection and services for victims of partner abuse, with the purpose of ensuring the safety of the victims and helping them reconstruct their lives. The outcome indicators for measuring the effectiveness of protective services among the previous studies included frequency of violence, whether the victim returned to the abuser, perceived level of internal control, depression and self-esteem, and attitudes toward marriage and family (Lundy & Grossman, 2001; Wiehe, 1998), with a major focus on recidivism of violence.

However, Wathen and MacMillan (2003) questioned whether incidence of reabuse is the appropriate measure for evaluating treatment interventions because women have no control over whether they are abused again, and they are often forced to return to an abusive relationship for economic or other reasons. A recent review of the past studies by Stover, Meadows, and Kaufman (2009) showed that extant interventions have a limited effect on repeat violence. Moreover, Wathen and MacMillan (2003) suggested that we should go beyond recidivism and include the evaluation of intervention to improve the health and well-being of abused women.

A follow-up question then is as follows: Besides recidivism or reduction of violence, would the victims of IPV experience some other changes or growth after they receive interventions? And what factors are associated with

the changes or growth? Werner and Smith's (1992) longitudinal follow-up study showed that with protective factors, some children who had experienced adversities in their childhood and adolescence could overcome the odds and grow into competent adults. These positive changes are referred to as "posttraumatic" growth, which involves transformation in the most ominous environment. During the process, the person is strengthened rather than destroyed by trauma (Anderson, 2010).

In Taiwan, the study by Song and Shih (2010) exploring the effects of the strengths perspective on recovery from partner abuse also revealed changes of self based on the narratives of the participants. The results bring promising prospects, however the sample size was relatively small. Thus the current study aimed to go further and explore the growth experiences of women who had been abused by their intimate partners through a survey on a larger sample size. The purposes of this study were twofold: (a) to determine the components in which the women who experienced IPV reported perceived growth and to what extent, and (b) to examine what were the important factors that facilitated their growth?

## **The Domains of Perceived Growth**

In the literature, perceived growth tends to be demonstrated in three general domains: changes in perception of self, changed relationships with others, and a changed philosophy of life that includes a deeper appreciation of life along with new life directions and priorities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The findings of Song and Shih (2010) showed that these changes included increased sense of self, affirmation of self, and action and realization of self. On the quantitative part of their study, the findings showed that the participants experienced positive changes in depression, empowerment, and life satisfaction. Thus, in the current study, perceived growth is defined as the three domains proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996). Specifically, the outcome measures for growth focused on the perceived changes of self and life satisfaction in accordance with the previous studies.

## **Facilitators of Changes**

There are four factors suggested in the literature that are associated with personal change: (a) personal factors such as strength and resources, (b) quality of helping relationship (accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth, and genuineness), (c) positive expectations, and (d) type of service and dose (Asay & Lambert, 1999). In the current study, potential correlates were

derived based on these four factors, and their relationships with empowerment, life satisfaction, and perceived change of self were explored.

## **Empowerment as a Mediator to Growth**

In the framework of Mears (2003), an especially important point is that the victims themselves could be change agents. Through the strategies of empowerment, education, sanction, treatment, and services, intermediate outcomes could be reached. Among the individual outcomes, the “decision-making skills and abilities” connotes self-efficacy, which is part of the concept of psychological empowerment (Rogers, Chamberlin, Ellison, & Crean, 1997; Song, 2006). Empowerment is defined as holding a positive attitude toward one’s own self-efficacy, mastery of environment, and the possibility and ability to influence the outside world, along with taking individual or collective action to fight against oppression and discrimination (Adams, 2003; Chaduha, Adams, Biegel, Auslander, & Gutierrez, 2004). Based on the framework and the definition, the investigator hypothesized that empowerment could serve as a mediator to mitigate the powerlessness and isolation and further help improve the mental health of the oppressed.

The few studies on correlates of empowerment have shown that income, quality of life, utilization of mental health services, participation in community activities, and overall life satisfaction might be associated with empowerment (Rogers et al., 1997; Walsh & Lord, 2004). The study specifically on women with experiences of IPV have revealed that life satisfaction (Song, 2006) were associated with increasing level of power.

## **Experience of IPV and Perceived Growth**

Empirically, very few studies examined the experience of IPV and perceived growth. Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann (2006) found that women still in an abusive relationship showed less overall growth than their counterparts. Wiehe (1998) mentioned that emotional abuse with a control connotation would have a greater negative impact on the self-esteem of the victim. However, receiving counseling and support from family and friends would help increase self-esteem (Wiehe, 1998). There is no literature to date to address how different types of abusers would impact the victims. Greene and Bogo (2002) mentioned Dysphoric/borderline and antisocial abusers engage in moderate to severe levels of violence and the latter are most likely to be in criminal behavior and use violence both inside and outside the home. The former tend to confine their violence to the intimate relationship. Thus, the

type of abuser could serve as an indicator of severe violence. The current study, in particular, aimed to explore the effects that borderline and antisocial abusers would have on the perceived growth.

## **Social Support, Coping Strategies, and Perceived Growth**

McFarlane, Soeken, Reel, Parker, and Silva (1997) pointed out that use of resource negatively correlated with end of abuse. Social support networks may be critical to their psychological well-being (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995). According to the stress-coping model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping strategies adopted under stressful events have effects on health and well-being. Moreover, the study by Mitchell and Hodson (1983) found that battered women who engaged in more behavioral coping demonstrated a greater sense of mastery and self-esteem.

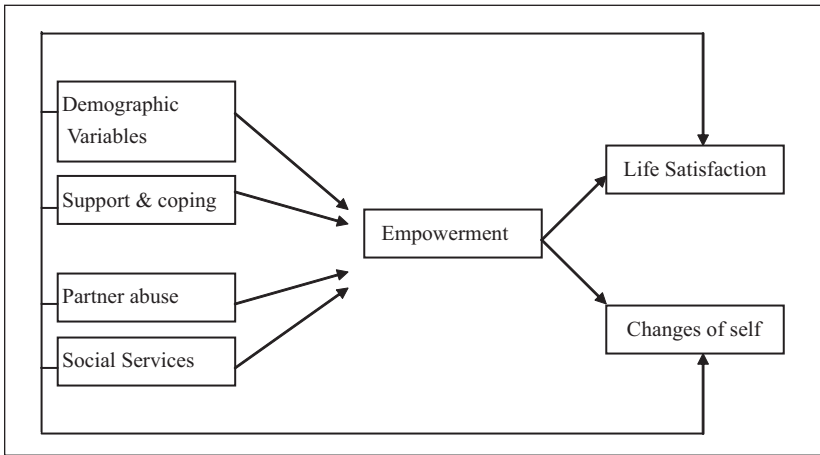
## **Social Services and Perceived Growth**

Studies have shown that shelter combined with collaborative services, such as housing, child care and counseling, parenting groups, and so on, could help in increasing self-esteem (Mears, 2003; Wiehe, 1998). Advocacy service might indirectly enhance the self-esteem, empowerment, and social support of the victim (Mears, 2003).

In summary, to date, many studies have focused on self-esteem, empowerment, and social support as the positive outcomes. This study tried to go beyond these outcomes by including life satisfaction and positive changes of self as the outcome measures.

## **Study Framework**

In this study, the investigator explored the potential factors that facilitate positive changes in accordance with these four components mentioned by Asay and Lambert (1999). The theoretical framework was depicted as in Figure 1. Based on the literature described above, the personal factors could be comprised of demographic variables, social support, and coping strategies. Social service, including service duration, frequency of contact, types of service, and relationship with social worker covered the second and fourth components. Empowerment, which served as the intermediate variable, was the indicator of the third factor. In addition, as this study used the sample of



**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework for the analysis

women who experienced IPV, the investigator hypothesized that their experiences of violence might affect their growth experiences.

Regarding the demographic variables, this study explored the correlations of age, education, and income with the dependent variables. The inclusion of income was based on its association with empowerment (Rogers et al., 1997). Age was a proxy of the maturation effect, and education might have to do with the ability of access to resources and abstract thinking, thus women with higher education might experience more positive changes. Moreover, in this study, life satisfaction was defined by how satisfied the participants were with life domains instead of a global cognitive assessment of a person's quality of life according to her or his chosen criteria as mentioned by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). The domain-specific life satisfaction could provide information for helping professionals in terms of treatment effects.

## Method

This study conducted a survey on women with experiences of partner abuse. A structured questionnaire was used for data collection and pretested on seven women receiving social services. The data collection was through self-administered questionnaires. Each participant was given a gift voucher (worth US\$6.3) to a convenience store.

## Participants

To recruit the participants, the investigator first contacted the Center of Prevention and Intervention for Domestic Violence and private sectors in each county or city in Taiwan. According to The Domestic Violence Law enacted in 1998, each county or city government in Taiwan was required to set up a Center for Domestic Violence Prevention and Intervention (DVPI). There are 24 centers already operating around Taiwan. Twenty-three centers agreed to collaborate with the investigator, and the total number of social workers available was 316. To ensure the confidentiality of their clients, Taiwan social workers could neither provide a list of clients nor allow a researcher to contact their clients directly. These restrictions made the random sampling impossible. Thus, the investigator asked social workers to recruit the participants for this study. Out of 316 social workers, a total of 265 social workers were willing to contact and invite their clients to participate in this study. The criterion for inclusion was that the clients had received social services and had either terminated services or their lives had remained relatively stable and would soon have services terminated. As a result, 392 questionnaires were given to the clients through their social worker. Within a 3-month period, the process yielded a valid sample of 191 participants.

## Measures

**Demographic variables.** The variables included actual age, marital status, living with others or not, education, employment, and income. The response category for each can be seen in Table 1.

**Social support.** Two questions were designed to measure this variable. One asked the perceived sufficiency of the support from family members, relatives, friends, and neighbors within a year and the other asked the satisfaction of that support. The response categories of each were (a) very insufficient (unsatisfied), (b) insufficient (unsatisfied), (c) fair, (d) sufficient (satisfied), (e) very sufficient (satisfied). The correlation between the two measures was 0.79; thus, a summation score was computed to represent the level of perceived support.

**Coping strategy.** This variable was measured by an 18-item scale developed by Bell (1977). This scale taps two types of coping strategies: emotional-focused (11 items; for example, eating, smoking, or drinking to relieve tension; psychologically prepare for the worst) and behavior-focused (seven items) coping (e.g., discuss with someone, take action immediately to solve problems). Each item was rated on three response categories: *never* (0), *once in a while* (1), and *often* (2).



**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of the Variables ( $N = 191$ )

Descriptive statistics	
variables	Mean (SD) or N (%)
Age	39.30 (9.65)
Marital status	
Not married	8 (4.2)
Married	124(65.3)
Divorced	54 (28.4)
Widow	4 (2.1)
Live with others (yes)	171 (91%)
Education	
Less than high school	73 (38.8)
High School	83 (44.1)
College	32 (17.0)
Employment	
No	50 (26.2)
Part-time	13 (6.8)
Full-time	88 (46.1)
Other	40 (20.9)
Income	
No income	36 (18.8)
Less than US\$315	34 (17.8)
US\$315 ~ 629	65 (34.0)
US\$630 ~ 945	35 (18.3)
US\$946+	21 (11.0)
Social support	6.22 (1.88)
Emotional coping	0.72 (2.67)
Behavioral coping	1.16 (0.34)
Social service	
Service duration (month)	10.91 (12.61)
Intensity of contact	
At least once a week	26 (14.1)
2-3 times a month	61 (33.0)
Once per month	64 (34.6)
Once every 2-3 months	34 (18.4)
Relationship with SWr:	4.44 (1.87)
Number of service types	2.94 (1.48)
Types of violence	
Physical abuse (yes)	160 (84.2)

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

variables	Mean (SD) or N (%)
Descriptive statistics	
Verbal abuse (yes)	161 (84.7)
Emotional abuse (yes)	127 (66.8)
Sexual abuse (yes)	47 (24.7)
Types of abuser	
Borderline personality (yes)	83 (43.5)
Antisocial personality (yes)	32 (16.8)
Causes of violence	
Violent tendency (yes)	82 (43.2)
Extramarital affair (yes)	29 (15.3)
Communicational discord (yes)	134 (70.2)
Poor emotional management (yes)	134 (70.2)
Controlling (yes)	122 (63.9)
Substance abuse or mental illness (yes)	97 (50.8)
Intensity of abuse (past)	
At least once a week	58 (31.0)
At least once per month	52 (27.8)
Once every 2-5 months	30 (16.0)
Once every 6+ months	47 (25.1)
Fear of abuser	
No	10 (5.3)
A bit	43 (22.9)
Very much	135 (71.8)
Negative impact	4.68 (2.33)
Live with abuser (yes)	73 (38.4)
Still being abused (yes)	45 (24.2)
Intensity of abuse (now)	
At least once a week	16 (35.6)
At least once per month	15 (33.3)
Once every 2-5 months	5 (11.1)
Once every 6+ months	9 (20.0)
Empowerment	2.78 (0.33)
Life satisfaction	2.60 (0.49)
Changes of self	7.77 (4.41)

The scale has been used earlier in Taiwan (Chen & Song, 2000) and the Cronbach's alpha was satisfactory (.93). A mean summation score was computed for emotional coping and behavioral coping, respectively

*Experience of partner abuse.* Eight variables were used to tap the domains of this concept. (a) Types of violence included the four types: physical abuse (e.g., beating, being pushed), verbal abuse (e.g., cursing, demeaning words), emotional abuse (e.g., disturbing one's sleep, control ones' action), and sexual abuse (e.g., forced sexual intercourse). The participants were asked to check the types they experienced. Each item had a yes or no response. (b) Types of abuser included antisocial personality type and borderline personality type. Indicators were designed based on the classification of Greene and Bogo (2002) to measure this variable. The participants were asked who else the abuser had abused or had conflict with. The response categories were as follows: (1) *none*, (2) *children at home*, (3) *elderly at home*, (4) *relatives*, (5) *friends*, (6) *coworkers*, and (7) *people that he doesn't know*. The abuser was rated as having *tendency of borderline personality* if the participants checked only any of the categories (2) to (4), as this type of abuser enacts violence mainly toward family members. The abuser was categorized as having *tendency of antisocial personality* if the participants checked any of the categories (5) to (7) as their aggressive behaviors usually extended toward nonfamily members (Greene & Bogo, 2002). (c) Causes of violence were measured by six types: (1) differences in opinion (conflict out of discordance, poor communication), (2) poor coping mechanism (ineffective coping methods, poor emotional control), (3) control tendency of the perpetrator (wanting to control the partner, emotional dependency, lack of trust toward the partner, chauvinist attitude), (4) violent tendency of the perpetrator, (5) behavioral problem of the perpetrator (loss of control due to substance abuse or mental illness), and (6) conflict due to an extramarital affair. The participants were asked to check any cause of violence that applied to them. (d) Intensity of abuse levels (originally nine categories, ranging from 2 to 3 times a week to once every 6 months) were combined into four levels as shown in Table 1. (e) Fear of abuser results came from asking the participant to what extent she feared her abuser while in his presence. The response category was as follows: no, a bit, and very much. (f) Negative impact from abuse was measured by 10 items of impact designed for this variable, such as feeling disappointed about marriage, work disruption due to being abused, emotional distress, health deterioration, and so on. The items checked were counted as the negative impact score. Two additional questions asked if the participant was living with the abuser (g) and if she was still being abused (f). The response category was as follows: yes or no.

**Social service.** There were four service variables used in this study: (a) "Service duration" was the number of months the participant had been receiving the service from their social worker. (b) "Intensity of contact" was drawn from four response categories as shown in Table 1. (c) "Relationship with social worker" included six items which were designed to tap this concept, including to what extent the participant trusted the social worker, if the participant thought that her worker cared about her, if the participant thought the worker understood her, how often the worker discussed the content and process of the service, how helpful was the information or suggestions provided by the worker, and to what extent the worker could instill hope when the participants felt down. The response category was a three-point scale, ranging from *a little* to *very often*. The internal consistency among the six items was 0.81. The responses of *very often* among items were counted as a good relationship score. (d) "Number of service types" was indicated by the participants checking the types of service received, including consultation, support, assistance, shelter, rehabilitation and therapy, and learning facilitating services. The checked items were counted to represent this variable.

**Empowerment.** The scale developed by Song (2006) was utilized to measure this concept. It was based on the original scale of Rogers et al. (1997) and further expanded and tested using the samples in Taiwan. There were eight dimensions among the 34 items, including self-efficacy and internal control, external control, interpersonal communication skills, interpersonal assertiveness, social assertiveness, social political resources and influence, social political power, and social political action. It was a four-point Likert-type scale, with response categories ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4). The scale had good psychometric properties. The internal construct validity was confirmed. The scale could discriminate the power scores among social work educators, social workers, and clients. In addition, the external construct validity was ensured by the significant association with "participation in group activities," "role opportunity and support," and "life satisfaction." The internal consistency of the entire scale was 0.954, and the 3-weeks test-retest reliability was 0.80 (Song, 2006). The Cronbach's alpha for the data in this study was .92.

**Life satisfaction.** This variable was measured by a scale of seven items developed by the investigator. The scale captured the level of satisfaction on various life aspects of living status, work, finance, interpersonal relations, children's status, self-competence, and external environment. Items were phrased in ways such as the following: *I am satisfied with my living status*. The participants rated each item among four categories: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree*, *agree*, and *strongly agree* (4). The construct validity of this

scale was ensured by its significant correlation with level of empowerment ( $\gamma = .66$ ), and the Cronbach's alpha was .80 (Song, 2006). The Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .79.

*Changes of self.* Sixteen items were designed, based on the findings of Song and Shih (2010) to capture this concept. Three items were for "enhanced sense of self" (e.g., able to accept myself), six for "self-affirmation" (e.g., know how to better express myself), and seven for "action and realization of self" (e.g., enhanced ability of using resources, being able to set goals and make an effort to reach them.). Each item was checked as "yes" or "no," and items checked as "yes" were counted as the change score.

## Data Analysis

Path analysis was conducted to test the theoretical model (Dillon & Goldstein, 1984). Regression analyses using simultaneous entry of all the independent variables were performed, respectively, on each dependent variable. This method focuses on estimating the effect of each independent variable while other independent variables in the model were taken into account. First, the regression analysis was conducted using empowerment as the dependent variable. Second, regression analysis on life satisfaction was performed by using the same set of independent variables plus empowerment. Third, the same analysis was conducted on "changes of self." Direct and indirect effects of the significant independent variables on each dependent variable were calculated. A direct effect is the regression weight (beta) of an independent variable on a dependent variable. An indirect effect is given by the product of the respective path coefficients (beta; Dillon & Goldstein, 1984). In this study, as empowerment was treated as a mediator, an indirect effect of an independent variable on life satisfaction or changes of self was calculated by the product of the significant beta of an independent variable on empowerment and the significant beta of empowerment on each of the dependent variables.

## Results

### Sample Characteristics

The average age of the 191 participants was 39.3 years (see Table 1), ranging from 19 to 75. Most of them stayed married (65.3%) and were living with others (91%). The majority of them held an education of either high school (41%) or junior high or less (38.8%). Most of the participants were employed (46.1%), and 26.2% were not employed. A bit over two thirds of them earned

monthly income between US\$315 and 629. The descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables were showed in the Table 1.

### *The Experience of Perceived Growth*

The average of the *empowerment* score among all the items was 2.78, indicating close to “agree with” the item statement. A bit more than half (51.6%) of the participants fell into the category of the “fair to middle” level of power (sum = 87-99), 22.1% in the “low power” category (86 or below), 20% in the “middle to high” (100-112), and 6.3% in the “high power” category (113 or above). They expressed more power on the “consciousness of social political power” (mean = 3.08), with the “interpersonal communication skills” ranking second (2.99), the “interpersonal assertiveness” ranking third (2.90), and the “self-efficacy and internal control” ranking fourth (2.89). The lowest ranking was on the “external control” (2.48).

The average of the *life satisfaction* item scores was close to “agree with” the item statement (2.60). The participants were more satisfied with their interpersonal relationships (mean = 2.96), the status of their children (2.81), living situation (2.65), and their capabilities (2.64). However, they were less satisfied with work (2.54), external environment (2.51), and financial situation (2.07). Out of the 16 items pertaining to *perceived changes of self*, the participants checked an average of 7.77 items (range = 0-16, median = 7). They expressed more changes on “affirmation of self” (mean = 0.54<sup>1</sup>), followed by “sense of self” (0.46), and “actualization of self” (0.45).

### *Examination of the Theoretical Framework*

In the framework, there were four groups of independent variables. Dummy variables were created for categorical or ordinal variables in the regression analyses. For education, the category of “college” was treated as the reference group, “US\$946 or above” for income, “at least once a week” for intensity of abuse and intensity of contact. The reference group in the above categorical variables was chosen due to two reasons: (a) the group presented the highest rank within the variable, thus there might be more difference between this group with others. (b) There were enough participants within this group for comparison.

***Correlations Among the Variables.*** The Pearson Product Correlation between empowerment and life satisfaction and changes of self were 0.625 and 0.394, respectively. Life satisfaction had a weak correlation ( $r = 0.216$ )

**Table 2.** Results of Regression Analyses (Valid Cases = 170)

Independent variables	Dependent variables					
	Empowerment		Life satisfaction		Perceived changes of self	
	$\beta^a$	Beta <sup>b</sup>	$\beta$	Beta	$\beta$	Beta
Constant	2.498		0.413		-16.650	
Demographic variables						
Age	-0.004	-0.140*	0.000	-0.003	0.042	0.094
Education less than high school	-0.046	-0.075	0.095	0.096	0.409	0.046
High school	0.018	0.030	0.021	0.022	1.483	0.172
Income						
No income	-0.183	-0.234*	-0.147	-0.116	0.308	0.027
Less than US\$315	-0.194	-0.254*	-0.181	-0.147	-0.592	-0.054
US\$315 ~ 629	-0.155	-0.246*	-0.029	-0.029	0.477	0.053
US\$630 ~ 945	-0.122	-0.154	0.083	0.066	1.458	0.130
Social support	0.040	0.246**	0.088	0.340***	0.097	0.042
Coping strategy						
Emotional coping	-0.241	-0.209**	-0.192	-0.105	1.415	0.087
Behavioral coping	0.233	0.254**	-0.012	-0.008	-0.272	-0.021
Partner abuse						
Physical abuse	0.049	0.060	0.018	0.014	-0.750	-0.065
Verbal abuse	0.080	0.095	-0.057	-0.042	0.338	0.028
Emotional abuse	0.082	0.130	-0.059	-0.058	-1.450	-0.160*
Sexual abuse	0.028	0.041	-0.071	-0.064	0.014	0.001
Borderline personality	0.078	0.128	0.024	0.025	-1.000	-0.115
Antisocial personality	0.137	0.176*	-0.041	-0.033	0.052	0.005
Violent tendencies	0.042	0.069	0.042	0.043	0.190	0.022
Extramarital affair	-0.062	-0.078	0.009	0.007	0.885	0.078
Communicational discord	-0.020	-0.030	0.023	0.022	0.483	0.051
Poor emotional mgmt	0.015	0.024	-0.052	-0.050	0.325	0.035
Controlling	-0.080	-0.128	0.021	0.021	1.814	0.203**
Substance abuse or mental illness	-0.056	-0.093	0.066	0.069	0.124	0.015

(continued)

**Table 2. (continued)**

Independent variables \ Dependent variables	Empowerment		Life satisfaction		Perceived changes of self	
	$\beta^a$	Beta <sup>b</sup>	$\beta$	Beta	$\beta$	Beta
	Intensity of abuse					
At least once per month	0.079	0.120	0.019	0.018	0.907	0.096
Once every 2-5 months	0.045	0.056	-0.079	-0.060	0.222	0.019
Once every 6+ months	0.111	0.159	0.040	0.036	1.035	0.103
Fear for abuser	0.141	0.100	0.089	0.039	1.012	0.050
No						
Very much	-0.081	-0.123	-0.079	-0.075	0.797	0.085
Live with abuser	-0.063	-0.103	-0.051	-0.052	1.051	0.119
Still being abused	0.011	0.015	0.058	0.051	-0.188	-0.019
Negative impact	-0.005	-0.041	-0.010	-0.047	0.518	0.275**
Social service						
Service duration	0.000	-0.016	-0.001	-0.030	0.031	0.093
Intensity of contact						
2-3 times a month	-0.038	-0.060	-0.080	-0.079	-1.334	-0.147
Once per month	0.014	0.022	-0.046	-0.046	-1.618	-0.181
Once every 2-3 months	0.066	0.084	-0.115	-0.090	-2.926	-0.260**
Relationship with SWr.	0.041	0.240**	0.005	0.017	0.500	0.204**
Number of service types	-0.001	-0.006	-0.010	-0.030	0.182	0.061
Empowerment	NA	NA	0.736	0.488***	4.974	0.370***
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)	0.519 (0.387)		0.654 (0.556)		0.573 (0.453)	
F value	3.93 (36, 131)***		6.68 (37, 131)***		4.79 (37, 132)***	

a. Unstandardized regression coefficient.

b. Standardized regression coefficient.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

with change of self. The correlations between each of the dependent variables and the independent variables were: empowerment (-0.009 to 0.37), changes of self (-0.022 to 0.441), life satisfaction (-0.008 to 0.642). The correlations among the independent variables were mostly weak, with the largest as  $r = 0.360$ . Served as an indicator of severity of violence, neither borderline



personality nor antisocial personality significantly correlated with intensity of abuse ( $p > .05$ ). However, the abusers with these two problems tended to have higher intensity of abuse. For example, among the abusers who had borderline personality, 37.0% had abused their partner at least once a week compared to 26.4% of their counterparts. Among the abusers who had antisocial personality, 45.2% had abused their partner at least once a week compared to 28.2% of their counterparts.

**Correlates of Empowerment.** There were 170 valid cases for the regression analyses. The results presented in Table 2 are those after one outlier was deleted. The entire model was significant ( $p = .0000$ ), with 51.9% (adjusted  $R^2 = .387$ ) of the variance explained by the independent variables. The significant correlates included age, income, social support, emotional coping, behavioral coping, tendency of antisocial personality, and relationship with social worker ( $p < .05$ ; see Table 2). The younger participants expressed more power. The participants who earned a monthly income of "US\$946 or above" had significantly more power than those who had no income, those who earned "less than US\$315," and those who earned "US\$315-629." Higher perceived social support and use of behavioral coping positively correlated with empowerment, whereas, the higher use of emotional coping negatively correlated with empowerment. Abusers' tendency of antisocial personality positively correlated with participants' level of power. In terms of social service, a better relationship with the social worker had a positive correlation with empowerment. Among the significant correlates, behavioral coping (Beta = .254) was the most important one, followed by income (Beta =  $-.254$  &  $-.246$ ), social support (Beta = .246), and relationship with social worker (Beta = .240; see Table 2).

**Correlates of Life Satisfaction.** The entire model included the four groups of independent variables and empowerment. After deleting one outlier, these variables explained 65.4% (adjusted  $R^2 = .556$ ) of the variance on life satisfaction, which is quite a significant amount. The results showed that perceived social support (Beta = .340) and empowerment (Beta = .488) were the two significant correlates of life satisfaction ( $p < .05$ ; see Table 2). The correlation was a positive one. Other variables in the model were not significant in their direct correlation with life satisfaction. The results supported the mediation effect of empowerment. Table 3 presented the indirect<sup>2</sup> effects of some variables on life satisfaction via their correlation with empowerment. As can be seen, only social support had both direct and indirect effects (total

**Table 3.** The Significant Effects of the Independent Variables on the Dependent Variables

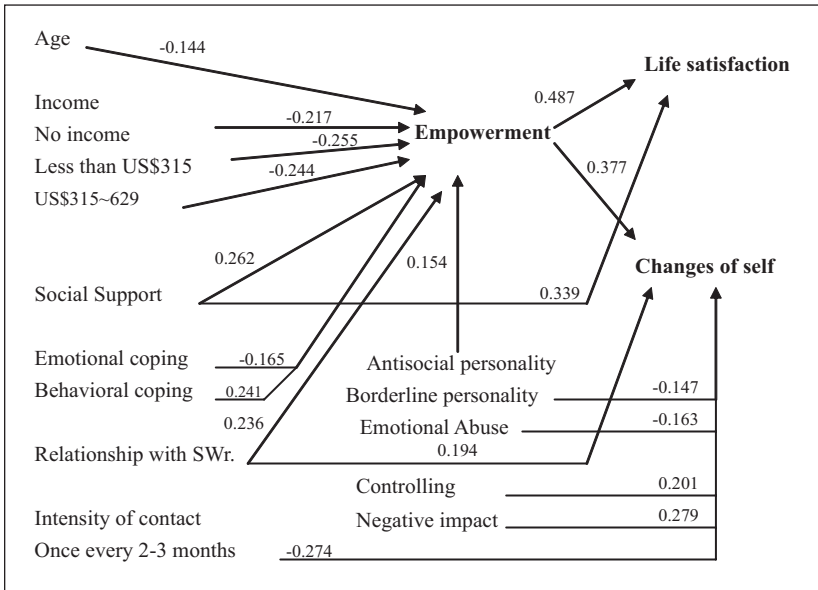
Independent variables	Dependent variables				
	Empower	Life satisfaction		Perceived changes of self	
Effects	Direct	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect
Age	-0.140a		-0.068		-0.052
Income					
No income	-0.234		0.114		-0.087
Less than US\$315	-0.254		-0.124		-0.094
US\$315 ~ 629	-0.246		-0.120		-0.091
US\$630 ~ 945	NS <sup>b</sup>				
Social support	0.246	0.340	0.120		0.091
Emotional coping	-0.209		-0.102		-0.077
Behavioral coping	0.254		0.124		0.094
Emotional abuse				-0.160	
Borderline personality					
Antisocial personality	0.176		0.086		0.065
Controlling				0.203	
Negative impact				0.275	
Intensity of contact					
2-3 times a month				NS	
Once per month				NS	
Once every 2-3 months				-0.260	
Relationship with SWr.	0.240		0.117	0.204	0.089
Empowerment	NA	0.488		0.370	

a. The direct effect in the table is standardized regression coefficient.

b. nonsignificant.

effect = 0.460) on life satisfaction. Taking both effects together, empowerment was still the most important one, followed by social support and income.

**Correlates of Perceived Changes of Self.** The entire model of independent variables could explain a significant amount of the variance (57.3%, adjusted  $R^2 = .453$ ) on perceived changes of self. Six independent variables were significant ( $p < .05$ ). Emotional abuse negatively correlated with the perceived changes (see Table 2). However, the violence induced by the abusers being



**Figure 2.** Results of Path Analysis

controlling as well as the negative impact from partner violence positively correlated with perceived changes. Two social service variables exerted significant direct effects on perceived changes of self. In terms of intensity of contact, those with one contact every 2-3 months reported less on perceived changes than those with at least one contact a week. The higher rating on the quality of relationship with their social worker positively correlated with perceived changes.

Again, the mediation effect of empowerment on perceived changes of self was supported by the data. As can be seen in Table 3, the direct effects and indirect effects on perceived changes came from two different groups of variables. The direct effects came from experiences of partner violence, social service, and empowerment; whereas the indirect effects mainly came from age, income, social support, and coping strategies. Only the “relationship with social worker” had both direct and indirect effects (total effect = 0.293) on perceived changes. Considering both effects, empowerment (0.370) was the most important one, followed by relationship with social worker (0.293), negative impact (0.270), and intensity of contact (-0.260; see Table 3). Compared with life satisfaction, perceived changes had more sources of influence. Experiences of violence and social services exerted more effects

on perceived changes of self than on life satisfaction. The results of path analysis is depicted in Figure 2 to illustrate the significant direct and indirect correlates of life satisfaction and perceived changes of self, respectively.

## **Discussion**

### *On the Way to Recovery—Realization of Self*

According to the profiles of women who experienced partner abuse, the participants in this study had suffered multiple types of frequent abuse, and most of them expressed great fear of the abuser. Yet, over time they had gained some power during the process of overcoming the adversity—they especially expressed feeling more power on the interpersonal level, social political consciousness, and self-efficacy and internal control. However, some of them felt less power on external control and social political actions. This might be due to a lack of resources and time given their stressful financial situation. As shown in the data, financial situation was the area in which the participants felt least satisfied. Nevertheless, they expressed more satisfaction with their interpersonal relationships and the status of their children and of themselves. They also revealed greater growth on affirmation of self. The results indicated the participants had gained growth mainly on psychological and interpersonal domains, which seems to be promising and supports the posttraumatic growth maintained by Werner and Smith (1992) and Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996). Such growth is a process of transformation and recovery, a rediscovery of oneself, regaining power internally and externally, and taking actions to pursue goals for recreating a satisfactory life. Yet, more resources and actions are needed for the participants to experience success in having mastery of external control, in turn, living a full and fulfilling life.

### *Professional Relationships and Intensity of Service Mattered*

The participants' relationship with the social worker was a significant correlate of both empowerment and perceived changes. The findings confirmed the importance of professional relationships as mentioned by Miller and Rollnick (2002) and Saleebey (2009). Social workers who serve as change agents could well use the relationship as a vehicle for empowerment and facilitating changes of their clients. Rapp (1998) defines the effective helping relationship as being purposeful, reciprocal, trusting, and empowering. Establishing a genuine and trusting relationship with the client is the first step of empowerment strategies based on the findings of

in-depth interviews with social workers (Song, 2008). For the clients with low self-esteem, isolation, or self-stigma due to long-term experiences of oppression, social stigma, and discrimination, such a relationship opens a new horizon for them. They experience the true acceptance by another human being who sees them as unique and important. The acceptance by others, in turn, might change their self-perception, help them in reframing their past experiences, instill hope for the future, and adopt a proactive attitude in pursuing goals.

Infrequent contact with clients such as once every 2-3 months could have a negative correlation with changes of self. It seems that at least one contact per month is the minimum necessary to facilitate positive changes. Intensity of contact and relationship building are like the two sides of a coin. Frequent contact certainly is necessary for establishing rapport: getting a real understanding of the client's life, setting goals and tasks, and discussing and monitoring the progress with clients. For the women who experienced IPV, the process of transformation and reframing sometimes involves self-doubts, fear of the threat from the abuser, and concrete demands of daily living; thus, they do need continuous expressive and instrumental support so that the transformation can take place.

### *Important Correlates: Social Support and Coping Strategy*

Social support was an important correlate of empowerment and life satisfaction. The findings confirmed the significance of social support as a role in contributing to a person's well-being. Perceived availability and satisfaction with social support could enhance a sense of belonging and sense of bonding (Lin, 1986). Both expressive support and instrumental support could facilitate psychological and interpersonal power and enhance life satisfaction (Krause, 1987; Lin, 1986). While taking into account social support, coping strategy was a significant correlate of empowerment. Such a finding was consistent with the literature (Arias & Pape, 1999; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). As expected, behavioral-focused coping exerted a positive effect on empowerment; whereas emotional-focused coping had a negative effect. The former could facilitate learning to master the handling of the situation and increasing self-efficacy, which is the domain of psychological empowerment.

The results indicate that social support and coping are the two areas on which the social workers need to focus. Support network interventions are needed for the women with IPV to help in maintaining, repairing, or expanding the support system as sometimes their connections with relatives and friends were damaged because of differences in making the decision to

leave or not leave the abusive relationship. Moreover, concrete discussion on coping strategies is critical, and behavioral coping strategies should be encouraged to facilitate motivation and actions in problem solving and self-growth.

### *From Negative Impact to Positive Changes*

The findings revealed that the greater the negative impact from IPV, the greater the perceived changes of self. Even though people are harmed by violence and one does not have to endure being abused to find meaning and purpose in life, it demonstrates that life still holds meaning even under these ominous conditions (Anderson, 2010). The idea of a priceless value in a life marked by violence may seem ironic; however, such a spirit has been called hardiness or resilience. It is like the rainbow after the rain or the weed growing out of the crevices in a rock. The participants indeed had gained an improved evaluation of self, a more profound understanding of the world, or a greater life purpose (Anderson, 2010). Thus, the findings would bring hope to both the victims and practitioners that growth beyond the pain is probable.

Concerning the effects of other variables pertaining to the experience of partner abuse, abusers with a tendency toward antisocial personality had a positive association with empowerment, and abusers being controlling had the same type of correlation with perceived changes of self. These results might imply the counteractions of women with IPV toward oppression from the abusers or that such violence reveals obvious wrongdoings, thus placing less self-blame on the participants and more possibility for reframing of the experiences. However, emotional abuse might make the participants feel too disturbed or distressed to see the possibility of changes. The correlations of violence with empowerment and perceived changes certainly need more investigation in the future to clarify the differential effects of the particular type of abuse, abuser, and cause of abuse; therefore, practitioners would know better how to serve the women with IPV.

### *Empowerment as a Mediator to Well-Being*

The results confirmed the mediation effect of empowerment on the well-being of the participants. Age, income, social support, coping strategy, tendency of antisocial personality, and professional relationship were indirectly associated with life satisfaction and perceived changes of self through empowerment. The implication of this finding is that empowerment is a critical and essential component of practice with women with IPV. Social workers should be

trained with empowerment strategies and tactics to be competent and helpful to the clients. Particularly, the mastery of external control and social political actions are the two dimensions that need to be further strengthened.

### *Limitations and Contributions*

This study went beyond recidivism and examined the well-being and growth experiences of women with IPV. In particular, the essential role of empowerment was carefully scrutinized. Given the fact that this was a survey study with one point measurement, the associations between variables clearly were not necessarily causal ones. The potential correlates included were comprehensive and the sample size was larger than 100 to reach relatively stable estimations (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989); however, larger valid cases are favorable to increase the internal validity of this study. Moreover, the study used an availability sample based on voluntary participation. Therefore, the external validity of the findings was compromised. Another limitation is that concise measure of type of partner abuse, social support, and domain-specific measure of life satisfaction were used in this study instead of standardized instruments, which might affect the psychometric properties and make cross-study comparisons difficult. Nevertheless, this study revealed a true spirit of growing out of ominous conditions and sheds light on how professional relationships, social supports, and coping methods could be helpful in this transformation and recovery process. If these women with IPV are empowered, it certainly gives hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

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## Notes

1. The statistics were computed by dividing the mean of sum score with the number of items. In this case, it is  $3.267/6$ .
2. The indirect effects were calculated by multiplying the beta of the variable on empowerment with the beta of empowerment on life satisfaction (0.487). For example, the indirect effect of age on life satisfaction was  $-0.068 = -0.140 \times 0.488$ .

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## **Bio**

**Li-yu Song** is professor at the Graduate Institute of Social Work, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan. She has been working on the field of mental health, with special focuses on rehabilitation, empowerment, recovery and treatment models. Her publications have addressed the issues encountered by persons with persistent mental illness and their care-givers as well as women with experiences of partner abuse. Over the past seven years, she has been promoting the applications of the strengths perspective and empowerment strategies to various fields of social work in Taiwan to enhance the quality of services and facilitating clients' recovery.