



## Lived Experiences of Psychologist in Handling Clients with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Jackie Lyn E Ejandra <sup>1\*</sup>, Uzziel R Despuig <sup>2</sup>, Cherish Anne R Mananquil <sup>3</sup>, Ericka Mae R Manlapaz <sup>4</sup>, Joy P Tarzona <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1, 2, 4</sup> CHRA, College of Arts and Sciences, City of Cabuyao, Laguna, Philippines

<sup>3</sup> College of Arts and Sciences, City of Cabuyao, Laguna, Philippines

<sup>5</sup> MAEd, RGC City of Calamba, Laguna, Philippines

\* Corresponding Author: Jackie Lyn E Ejandra

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### Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore the essence of the lived experiences of psychologists in handling clients with post-traumatic stress disorder. The mental health sector is markedly under-resourced in the Philippines. The country has approximately 1,400 registered psychologists, equating to about 1 psychologist per 80,000 people. This shortage is compounded by limited funding, with only 3 to 5 percent of the total health budget allocated to mental health. Five psychologists from various cities who have been practicing as professionals in the province of Laguna were interviewed using the validated interview questionnaire. Phenomenological designs were used in this study to understand, describe, and interpret the lived experiences of psychologists. Six emergent themes were identified: emotional complexity, emotional challenges in trauma counseling, stress-relief strategies for psychologists, effectiveness of coping strategies in maintaining mental health, support systems in maintaining mental health and support systems in client care. The study therefore reminds readers that strength in resilience, excellent support systems, and perfect coping skills are the epitome of how psychologists should feel and how their clients should heal.

**Keywords:** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Psychologists, Mental Health, Support Systems

### 1. Introduction

The distribution of psychologists shows significant disparities globally. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the global average is about 13 mental health workers per 100,000 people, with Europe having the highest density at 45 per 100,000. This uneven distribution highlights challenges in providing adequate mental health services worldwide, with high-income countries typically having more psychologists per capital than low- and middle-income countries. This disparity underscores the need for increased investment in mental health resources globally to bridge these gaps. Working with traumatic stress in a public psychiatric hospital exposes clinical psychologists to vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress. While much research has focused on the methodologies and outcomes of treating PTSD, there is a significant gap in understanding the personal lives and emotional landscapes of the psychologists who engage with these complex cases. Treating high-risk patients adds to this stress, putting psychologists in potentially dangerous situations. Additionally, the practitioners noted that gender and race influence their professional and personal roles when dealing with traumatic stress cases, affecting their overall experience and approach to treatment. These factors collectively highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by psychologists in such demanding environments. (Munishvaran and Booyesen, 2022) <sup>[18]</sup>

The mental health sector is markedly under-resourced in the Philippines. The country has approximately 1,400 registered psychologists, equating to about 1 psychologist per 80,000 people. This shortage is compounded by limited funding, with only 3 to 5 percent of the total health budget allocated to mental health. Cultural stigmas and socioeconomic barriers further hinder access to psychological services.

These factors collectively present significant challenges to providing adequate mental health care in the Philippines, emphasizing the need for comprehensive policy and resource enhancements. Cultural stigmas and socioeconomic barriers further hinder access to psychological services. Mental illness is often perceived as a sign of personal weakness or a source of shame, discouraging individuals from seeking help. The lack of mental health education and awareness exacerbates these stigmas, leading to underreporting and untreated mental health issues. In addition, the high cost of mental health services and the uneven distribution of facilities, predominantly located in urban areas, create substantial access challenges for those living in rural and impoverished regions. These factors collectively present significant challenges to providing adequate mental health care in the Philippines, emphasizing the need for comprehensive policy and resource enhancements. Strategic initiatives, including increasing the mental health workforce, expanding educational programs to reduce stigma, and improving the accessibility and affordability of services, are crucial to addressing the mental health crisis in the country. Psychologists who work with clients suffering from PTSD often face significant challenges. These professionals can feel overwhelmed by the intense emotional demands of their work, leading to burnout and compassion fatigue. Handling such cases requires not only technical expertise but also emotional resilience. To manage these stresses, psychologists often rely on support systems such as supervision, peer support groups, and professional counseling. These resources are crucial in helping them maintain their well-being and continue providing effective care to their clients. However, access to such support systems can be limited, particularly in under-resourced areas, further highlighting the need for comprehensive mental health support for both clients and practitioners.

This inquiry is relevant for enhancing the well-being of psychologists and improving the overall environment for clients. By acknowledging and addressing the personal impacts on psychologists, this study aims to foster a more holistic approach to mental health care, ensuring that those who heal others are supported and understood in their professional journeys.

## 2. Methodology

### A. Research Design

This study used a qualitative method to explore the lived experiences of psychologists in handling clients with post-traumatic stress disorder. Phenomenological research design sought to understand, describe, and interpret human behavior and the meaning individuals make of their experiences: it focuses on what was experienced and how it was experienced. (Ayton, 2023) <sup>[1]</sup> The researchers used a phenomenological approach to explore the deeper understanding of a participant's life experiences and their challenges as a mental health professional. The researchers also used in-depth interviews and guide questions for the interview part of the research, with audio recordings with the participants' consent.

### B. Research Locale

This study was carried out within the province of Laguna to explore the lived experiences of psychologists in handling clients dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. Only those clinical psychologists assigned or working in the province of

Laguna were chosen to participate in this study.

### C. Population and Sampling

Population refers to the set or group of all the units on which the findings of the research are to be applied. In other words, a population is a set of all the units that possess variable characteristics under study and for which findings of research can be generalized. (Shukla, 2020) In this research, the researcher used purposive sampling and snowball sampling. (Ersela, 2019) explained that purposive sampling is used when the target of a sample has certain characteristics, so it may not take another sample that does not have the characteristics that have been determined. While (Nikolopoulou, 2022), explains that snowball sampling is a non-probability method that involves current participants recruiting new ones, making it useful for studying individuals with specific, hard-to-identify traits. The researchers chose a sample of five psychologists to participate in the study. The researchers used purposive and snowball sampling as it was the easiest way to gather respondents and conduct the survey.

### D. Research Participants

The research respondents consisted of five experienced clinical psychologists who had been practicing as professionals in the province of Laguna. Participants must meet two requirements in order to be eligible: they must be licensed to practice psychology in the Philippines and have prior and current experience working with individuals who have been diagnosed with PTSD (preferably handled at least one to three cases of PTSD clients with complete sessions). By capturing their lived experiences, the researchers hope to gain valuable insights that can inform and enhance the delivery of mental health services in the province of Laguna. The researchers used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the participants in this study. The word "Pseudonym" comes from Greek roots; with "pseudo" meaning "false" and "Sonoma" meaning name, the literal translation is "bearing a false name."

### E. Research Instrumentation

In this study, the researchers used a self-made questionnaire to obtain the appropriate data needed that is designed to elicit detailed information. The self-made questionnaire comprises six questions divided into three sections: (one) the challenges of psychologists handling clients with PTSD (two) the coping mechanism of psychologists (three) the support system of psychologists.

Prior to presenting the questionnaire to participants, the researchers were guided by three validators to validate and approve the self-made questionnaires. The validation process ensured that the questionnaire was concise, clear, and free of bias. These validators were experts in psychology, research methodology, and survey design. The aim was to capture the nuanced perspectives and experiences of psychologists, shedding light on the complexities of their work.

### F. Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers used the following procedures to carry out this study:

To demonstrate their authority to conduct the study, the researchers first presented a consent letter signed by their research adviser. The researchers used purposive sampling and snowball sampling, in which participants were selected based on specific criteria and recommendations by other

participants who also met the criteria appropriate to the study. After identifying the participants, they were given informed consent forms indicating their willingness to participate in the study. The researchers then proceeded to present the study's objectives, potential risks and benefits, and the participants' rights to decline or withdraw at any time. This explanation ensured that the participants were well-informed and comfortable with their decision to participate in the study.

In order to obtain a deeper knowledge of the experiences of psychologists handling with clients who have post-traumatic stress disorder, the researchers conducted follow-up questions throughout the interview along with giving a set of questions that supported the interaction. The duration of the interview session was between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The researchers conducted online and face-to-face interviews in a private area alone with the participants to respect their privacy.

### G. Treatment of Qualitative Data

The following qualitative methods for data analysis were used during the collection process:

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative and open-ended data. The semi-structured interview was used to gather information and to obtain a thorough and in-depth understanding of participants' viewpoints about their lived experiences handling clients with post-traumatic disorder. Responses from individual semi-structured interviews were collected and verified, providing researchers with comprehensive data and additional evidence from participants while taking the study's objectives into account.

After conducting semi-structured interviews, the recorded audio or transcribed text was analyzed using a process of thematic analysis. This method enabled us to identify recurring themes, patterns, and ideas that emerged from the data. Descriptive labels were assigned to the data through coding, allowing the researchers to organize and analyze it efficiently.

To verify the reliability and validity of the qualitative data approaches such as checking with participants, cross-referencing data, and keeping a detailed record of the process will be used.

Finally, after acquiring the necessary details and information, the researchers analyzed the data to draw study-related findings.

### H. Ethical Consideration

To protect the privacy and security of the research participants, the researchers mindfully ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study. Before the audio-recorded interview, every participant was assured of absolute confidentiality and asked to sign a consent form informing them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. While conducting the survey, the researchers also considered the respondents' feelings and thoughts of the participants. Ensuring participant confidentiality helped build relationships and trust throughout the study process. The Data Privacy Act of 2012 was enacted to "protect the fundamental human right of privacy, of communication while ensuring free flow of information to promote innovation and growth. The state recognizes the vital role of information and communications technology in nation-building and its inherent obligation to ensure that personal information in information and communications systems in the government

and in the private sector are secured and protected."

### 3. Results and Discussions

The chapter presents an analysis of the lived experiences of psychologists who work with clients diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Key themes emerged from participant interviews, reflecting the emotional challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems utilized by these professionals. Psychologists described their daily encounters with PTSD clients, highlighting a range of emotions, from empathy to confusion, while acknowledging the complexities and variability in treatment. Common challenges included difficulties in fostering client engagement, particularly in virtual settings, and societal barriers that hinder therapeutic progress. The psychologists emphasized the necessity of establishing clear boundaries to manage emotional spillover from work, which is essential for preserving their mental well-being. Various stress-relief strategies, such as physical activities and family bonding, were noted as effective in maintaining their mental health. Additionally, psychologists recognized the importance of support systems, comprising both personal relationships and professional networks, in enhancing their competence and emotional resilience. The integration of ongoing training and peer collaboration was identified as crucial for professional growth and providing effective care. Lastly, the findings led to the proposal of the "Resilient Minds Initiative Program," aimed at enhancing psychologists' emotional well-being and professional skills through structured support and training. The anticipated outcomes of the program include improved coping strategies, increased competency in trauma treatment, and a supportive organizational culture. This initiative is designed to benefit psychologists by enhancing their emotional resilience and professional skills, enabling them to provide more effective care to clients while safeguarding their own mental health and well-being.

### 4. Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in the results, Psychologists working with clients diagnosed with PTSD encounter a deeply challenging and emotional journey that requires strength and resilience. They often face a complex mix of emotions, from profound empathy to moments of anxiety, as they connect with clients' traumatic experiences. Initially, the intensity of these cases can bring about nervousness, but as they adjust and gain experience, psychologists find ways to manage these powerful feelings over time. This journey requires setting clear boundaries to avoid emotional overflow and burnout, essential to maintaining their well-being. In this emotionally charged work, psychologists are reminded of the importance of self-care and reflection, which are necessary practices to help them stay grounded and resilient as they face the heavy impact of their clients' trauma.

PTSD cases present unique challenges for every psychologist. They often face barriers that make connecting with clients more difficult. For example, while providing virtual therapy, psychologists encounter technical barriers in establishing rapport because there are obstacles in online sessions that can limit the non-verbal cues that help establish trust. In addition, social issues such as financial strains on clients or complicated family structures make things even more complicated in treatment. All such psychologists need support. Be it family, colleagues, or professional networks that have time to listen to them for providing emotional

support, advice, and validation. They can also use mindfulness, adequate self-care, and supportive loved ones to cope with the emotional burden of this job. Such strategies render strength to provide effective therapy when the job is overwhelming.

This study illuminates something uniquely challenging about the task of trauma counseling, particularly concerning psychologists working with clients dealing with PTSD.

Psychologists walk this tightrope between empathy and professionalism. They work hard to get their clients off the hook without getting damaged. Herein lies the depth of emotional resilience through the experiences and highlights the importance of self-care, reflection, and supportive relationships toward living well. With self-reflection, healthy boundaries, and continued skills, the psychologist will be able to meet personal and professional needs. The study, therefore, reminds readers that strength in resilience, excellent support systems, and perfect coping skills are the epitome of how psychologists should feel and how their clients should heal.

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