

POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH AND
POSITIVE MACRO-LEVEL
OUTCOMES

by

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ABSTRACT

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Common patterns and themes emerge from the unique experiences of individuals who have managed to turn personal tragedies into positive macro-level outcomes, such as societal change or agency creation. A number of research questions exploring the factors that influence an individual's decision and ability to create positive change from trauma, pain or suffering were explored throughout the study. Interviews and document reviews contributed to the study of why and how some individuals have been able to accomplish such commendable undertakings. A purposeful sample of nine individuals, both males and females, were interviewed. Purposeful and snowball methods of sampling were used to gain access to these individuals. Established, open-ended interview questions initiated the interview, followed by grounded theory coding and categorizations. The need to help others, spirituality, keeping memory alive, and furthering loved one's interests were motivating factors. Benefits were described as healing, fulfilling and strength gained. Harms were exhaustion and lack of balance in life. Practitioners, policy makers and individuals who have experienced trauma can utilize the models discussed to implement future positive change.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

The study of people affected by trauma has resulted in a substantial body of literature exploring the negative effects of trauma. The following statistics lend support for the need of ongoing trauma research. In 2010, an estimated 3.8 million people over the age of 12 were victims of violent crimes (rapes or sexual assaults, robberies, aggravated assaults and simple assaults), according to the United States Bureau of Justice. For every 1,000 persons, one rape, one assault with injury and two robberies were reported. Six murder–victims per 100,000 persons also occurred in 2010. For the first time, males (15.7 per 1,000) and females (14.2 per 1,000) had similar rates of violent crime victimization in 2010. The number of traumatic events experienced by individuals in the United States according to these statistics alone is tremendous. Other events that result in trauma for many are acts of war, loss of loved ones, natural disasters, accidental tragedies, terrorism, abduction, and abuse. Based on data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, an estimated 1,760 children nationally died from abuse or neglect in 2009. Research indicates that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys will be sexually victimized before adulthood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). The infant mortality rate in the United States is 6.69 deaths per 1,000 live births, according to the Center for Disease Control (2009). In 2009 there were 36,909 suicides in the United States (Center for Disease Control). According to the United States Department of Defense, 5,983 military soldiers have been killed and 43,419 soldiers have been wounded in action since 2001 (2010). The number of accidental deaths in the United States tolled 118,021 in 2009, as reported by the Center for Disease Control. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that

203,900 children were victims of family abductions and 58,200 children were victims of non-family abductions (2009). Common emotional symptoms of trauma are: shock, denial, anger, irritability, guilt, shame, self-blame, depression, feelings of hopelessness and sadness, confusion, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, fear, withdrawal, and feeling disconnected or numb (Jackson, 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Physical symptoms arising as a result of trauma are: insomnia or nightmares, being startled easily, racing heartbeat, shallow breathing, aches and pains, and fatigue (Morina et al., 2011; Spoomaker & Montgomery, 2008; Hoge, C. et al., 2007) If chronic post-traumatic stress persists, survivors often manifest diseases such as chronic fatigue syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, interstitial cystitis, and myofascial, lower back and pelvic pain (Jackson, 2007). Relationships are sometimes negatively affected as well. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the most severe form of emotional and psychological trauma. Its primary symptoms include intrusive memories or flashbacks, avoiding reminders of the traumatic event, and living in a constant state of red alert (Smith & Segal, 2008). Most people associate PTSD with battle-scarred soldiers but any overwhelming life experience can trigger PTSD, especially if the event is perceived as unpredictable and uncontrollable (Smith & Segal, 2008).

Trauma literature is justifiably saturated with studies examining the negative effects of trauma, however, the exploration of individuals who have managed to go beyond their personal grief and create positive macro-level outcomes as a result of their trauma has not received methodical investigation. The study of why and how some individuals are able to influence and create positive changes that benefit society after experiencing a personal trauma is a phenomenon worthy of social science investigation. The positive outcomes for society, such as laws and education that prevents deaths, feeding homeless children or helping the disabled, are obvious. Less apparent are the effects the undertakings have on the individual, either

constructive, negative or perhaps a combination of both. The following qualitative research study explored the effects achieving a societal contribution post trauma have on the individual, as well as develops a greater understanding of the role such an undertaking plays in the progression of healing.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Potential Consequences of Trauma

The clichés, “every cloud has a silver lining” or “what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger,” have been retold through many generations, and researchers are exploring the validity of such concepts in regard to benefits obtained by individuals who have experienced negative events, but are able to find or create meaning. Although the premise that people are capable of transforming tragic or traumatic experiences into an acquisition of strength, wisdom, empathy, and positive changes is ancient and reflected through many historical writings, (The Holy Bible, 1698; Socrates, 1998; Shakespeare, 1623; Plato, trans. 2001) social science investigation of this phenomenon is in its infancy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The term used to describe this phenomenon is posttraumatic growth, introduced into social science literature by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), although many authors have used the terms thriving, meaning making, recovery, resiliency, and perceived benefits to describe similar positive growth posttrauma. While not denying the adverse effects of traumatic events, research has begun to establish strong support for the posttraumatic growth experienced by individuals after a traumatic event (Park, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Saakvitne, 1998; Cohen, 1998; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). Conducting a literature review on this topic proved challenging. Much information was found regarding trauma, but no information addressed the posttraumatic growth resulting in positive macro-level outcomes was found. The closest related writings were articles written about people who had created organizations or advocated for changes following a trauma. These articles were not research based and were primarily found in the injury prevention literature. The articles were predominantly focused on how the injury prevention profession can partner with survivor advocates to influence change. A review of the

professional literature using the databases *Social Science Abstracts*, *PsycINFO* and *Sociological Abstracts*, and using the keywords *social work*, *trauma*, *posttraumatic growth*, *meaning making*, *psychology*, *resilience*, *recovery* and *thriving* revealed information that helped piece together related theories. Various governmental sources provided further information. The objective of this literature review is to investigate the designs, methodologies, and findings derived from an emerging small body of literature of studies using the framework of posttraumatic growth to assess the implications of posttraumatic positive outcomes, as well as identify the gaps in the literature. Studies exploring the negative implications of trauma will not be discussed except when examining them as precursors or catalysts for positive growth.

When a reaction to a trauma occurs, four potential consequences can occur, according to O'Leary and Ickovics (1995). One possibility is a downward slide in which the initial detrimental effect is compounded and the individual succumbs. A second possible outcome is that the person survives but is diminished or impaired in some respect. A third possible outcome is a return to the pre-adversity level of functioning, a return that can be either rapid or more gradual. The fourth possibility, the focus of this literature review, is that the person may not merely return to the previous level of functioning but may surpass it in some manner (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Carver, 1998).

2.1.1 A Paradigm Shift

In reviewing the literature regarding trauma, recovery, resilience, thriving, and posttraumatic growth it is apparent that a paradigm shift from viewing the residual effects of the experience from "illness and disadvantages to strengths gained" has received increased attention and postulates a positive view or framework from which researchers can build upon (O'Leary, 1998, p. 426). Traditionally, trauma literature predominantly focused on the negative consequences of trauma, such as depression, anxiety, fatigue, shock, and stress, culminating in

the inclusion of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Morris, Finch, Rieck, & Newberry, 2005; Stuhlmiller & Dunning, 2000). Fournier (2002) argues that the “traditional focus on negative posttrauma outcomes and symptom relief has been to the detriment of the underlying process of adaptation and growth” many individuals can utilize (p.113). Furthermore, literature pertinent to trauma and recovery reveals a movement from studies focusing on recovery and resilience to thriving and meaning making, and most recently, turning a negative event into positive growth. This paradigm shift is an important factor in the construction of meaningful and comprehensible theories regarding a complex phenomenon in its early development. The paradigm shift does not appear to negate the negative effects of trauma, but rather to “redefine the victims of trauma as individuals capable of positive change rather than merely survivors” (Morris, Finch, Riech, & Newberry, 2005, p.575).

2.1.1.1 Posttraumatic Growth Defined

“Posttraumatic growth is the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1999, 2004). Posttraumatic growth, a complex explanatory model, implies that individuals are capable of developing beyond their previous levels of functioning, experiencing a greater degree of functioning, obtaining an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer life (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Carver (1998) suggests that “something about the experience of the adversity and its aftermath has taken the person to a higher plane of functioning” (p.124). Carver (1998) uses an analogy of a child who contracts chicken pox and emerges from the experience with an immunity, suggesting that the child’s health is better afterward than it was before falling ill, to illustrate the potential positive effects of growth through adversity. Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun (1998) conceptualized posttraumatic growth as “a

significant beneficial change in cognitive and emotional life that may have behavioral implications as well” (p.3).

For the purpose of this study, Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun’s (1994) definition of posttraumatic growth as the experience of positive change occurring as a result of struggling through a crisis will be used to delineate growth. The individuals involved in the study have achieved a positive macro-level outcome. The study explored whether the cognitive, behavioral and emotional implications of the struggle to attain the goal were or were not personally beneficial. The findings of the study may result in an alternate definition of posttraumatic growth for individuals who attain a positive change beyond themselves or may be described accurately by Carver’s (1998) definition of a higher plane of functioning post trauma.

2.1.1.2 Correlations Between Trauma and Growth

The traditional focus on negative implications of trauma has overshadowed the positive attainments many individuals experience after a trauma. Perhaps surprisingly, “in the developing literature on posttraumatic growth, reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.1). However, Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) warn that the traditional assumptions that traumas often result in disorder should not be replaced with expectations that growth is an inevitable result. Instead, a literature review indicates that “continuing personal distress and growth often coexist,” creating a catalyst for continued growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.2). Calhoun (1998) suggests that with the removal of all distress through successful coping, the most productive period of growth may come to an end. As more studies emerge, this theme of “coexistence” introduces an interesting marriage of previously perceived dichotomies. “A theoretical assumption exists that people who have experienced a traumatic event may need

time to recover and ruminate before positive growth-like outcomes can be perceived” (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998, p.3).

2.1.1.3 Posttraumatic Growth Categories and Tools

The general findings of studies involving individuals who experienced growth after a traumatic event indicate that growth can occur in a number of areas in a person’s life. Studies revealed that individuals indicated positive changes in relationships with family members and others (Fromm, Andrykowski, & Hunt, 1996), attitudes, skills (Elder & Clipp, 1989), knowledge, and confidence (Carver, 1998). Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996) conducted a principal components analysis during the development of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) to allow quantification of the experience of growth. The analysis revealed five areas of reported posttraumatic growth: spiritual change, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and personal strength (Morris, Finch, Rieck, & Newbery, 2005). Other authors label the transformations resulting from trauma as: the reconstruction of meaning; the renewal of faith, trust, hope and connection; and the redefinition of self, self-in-relation, and sense of community (Grossman & Moore, 1995; Harvey, 1996; Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Saakvitne, 1998). The validity and reliability of the PTGI were tested with findings that the PTGI had good internal reliability and that the discriminant validity of the subscales was supported by their differential relationship with other constructs, as well as being a multidimensional measure (Cohen, 1998). A second tool for measuring posttraumatic growth, the Stress-Related Growth Scale (SRGS) developed by Park (1996), is a 50-item measure that further contributes to the development of quantitative research studies. Cronbach’s alpha for the SRGS was .94 and the test-retest reliability was .81, and the measure was unidimensional (Cohen, 1998). These first measures advanced the efforts of researchers to include quantitative data to the study of thriving. Additionally, the Perceived Benefit Scales, measuring perceived positive life changes after negative events, has also contributed to the study of posttraumatic growth by quantifying the categories in which

individuals observe benefits post trauma (McMillen & Fisher, 1998). Factor analyses suggest that the Perceived Benefit Scales consist of eight subscales: lifestyle changes; material gain; increases in self efficacy, family closeness, community closeness, faith in people, compassion, and spirituality. Internal consistency and test–retest coefficients range from adequate to excellent. The scales correlate with indicators of severity and differ by type of negative event experienced (McMillen & Fisher, 1998).

2.1.1.4 Posttraumatic Growth Studies

The results of a study of 219 Australian undergraduate students confirm the applicability of the PTGI to measure the multidimensional nature of positive posttraumatic growth (Morris, Finch, Rieck, & Newbery, 2005). The study results indicated five factors for the PTGI, and moderate levels of posttraumatic growth. The five-factor solution confirmed the multidimensionality of posttraumatic growth, and the PTGI was shown to be a reliable measure of positive growth after a traumatic event. Case study evidence indicates that religious and spiritual beliefs can be experienced as helpful to people in recovering from stressful and traumatic life events (O'Reilly, 1996; Pargament, 1996; Park, Cohen, & Much, 1996; Rudnick, 1997; Schumaker, 1992). There is also evidence that religious and spiritual beliefs can develop subsequent to and as a result of trauma (Khouzam, 2000; Khouzam & Kissmeyer, 1997; Siegel & Schrimshaw, 2000). Schuster (2001) conducted a national survey in the U.S. in the days following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and found that 90% of the sample reported turning to their religious faith (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). Falot found that (1997), spirituality was an important resource of overcoming trauma in women with multiple trauma and abuse histories. In another study, individuals who were more committed to spiritual and religious goals following trauma were more likely to say they had recovered from the trauma and had found meaning in it (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser (1998). Spirituality was identified as

one of the major domains of positive change in a third study of women diagnosed with HIV (Siegel & Schrimshaw, 2000).

A study investigating whether posttraumatic growth could also be found among people who had been exposed to particularly severe trauma over a period of several years (1991 to 1995) during the war in the area of the former Yugoslavia used the PTGI as its main instrument (Powell, Rosner, Butollo, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2003). The overall means for the scale were considerably lower than reported in most studies of other kinds of trauma. Younger people reported considerably more growth than older people. The study supported other published findings (Ehlers, Maerck, & Boos, 2000) that “changes in self/positive life attitudes” is negatively associated with PTSD symptoms and that perceived permanent change for the worse predicts PTSD symptoms. This study implies that a prolonged duration of trauma hinders some individuals’ abilities to perceive positive growth posttrauma. In additional studies (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Bates & Jackson, 2004), researchers found that females reported more positive growth compared to males, and older individuals experienced lower levels of positive growth outcomes compared with younger cohorts. However, there was no significant difference in scores between females and males in regard to the perception of new possibilities in life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Bates & Jackson, 2004). “Among the life crises that have produced reports of posttraumatic growth, at least in some form, are” (Tedeschie & Calhoun, 2004, p.3): bereavement (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1990; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Hogan, Morse & Tason, 1996; Lehman, 1993; Schwab, 1990), HIV infection (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998), cancer (Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2003; Collins, Taylor, & Skokan, 1990; Cordova, Cunningham, Carlson, & Andrykowski, 2001), heart attacks (Affleck, Tennen, Croog, & Levine, 1987), and sexual assault (Draucker, 1992; Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001; McMillen, Zuravin, & Rideout, 1995). These findings also indicate that the type of trauma does not appear to correlate with posttraumatic growth.

2.1.1.5 Related Concepts

A review of studies in which researchers used qualitative and quantitative methods to examine how individuals derived benefits from negative events reveals that viewing positive implications may be a crucial part of recovery (Parry & Chesler, 2005; Armour, 2003; Wheeler, 2001; Danforth & Glass, 2001; McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997; Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2003). In order to further explore the literature regarding the creation of positive meaning from a negative event, this literature review must also examine studies of recovery, resiliency, and meaning making, which are related to the literature of posttraumatic growth. A surfacing theme within the studies reveals that the extrapolation of positive results appears to contribute to an individual's achievement of well-being, not the situations themselves (Parry & Chesler, 2005, Danford & Glass, 2001, McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997, Armour, 2003, and Wheeler, 2001). Therefore, the following studies reviewed were chosen for the diversity of negative events researched, enabling an encompassing view of coping strategies from multiple situations. The studies include childhood cancer survivors, bereaved parents, homicide survivors, disaster survivors, bereaved middle-age widows, and victims of crime. Four recurrent themes in an exploratory study of natural disaster survivors were identified: seeking support, seeking meaning, problem solving, and avoidance (Ibanez, Buck, Khatchikian, & Norris, 2004). In congruence with the literature review of recovery, seeking meaning paralleled other studies' findings that (1) the individuals sought meaning in an effort to make sense of the event, (2) using religious or spiritual guidance, (3) attempts to discover what is important in life, (4) efforts to change their perception of the stressor in a positive way, and (5) the belief that something had been learned from the experience (Ibanez, Buck, Khatchikian, & Norris, 2004). For example, in a study of landmine survivors, Ferguson, et al., found that the survivor's acceptance of limb loss and their state of psychological recovery were greatly influenced by the individual's

resiliency characteristics, societal support, medical care, economic situation, and societal attitudes (2004).

Theory on thriving is still in its early stages of development. The study of thriving grew out of a foundation of research on resilience. In the literature on traumatic life events, the phrase *search for meaning*, encompasses various concepts such as making sense, coherence, purpose, existential confrontations, and creating meaning (Landsman, 1997). The majority of studies on thriving have employed qualitative methods, and quantitative studies are scarce. The following studies focused on the concept of thriving, going beyond the studies focusing merely on recovery. Parry and Chesler (2005) discuss emerging theoretical frameworks which suggest that a traumatic event does not have to be viewed only as a psychosocial trauma that requires recovery, but can also be a potential catalyst for growth (Carpenter, 1997; Carver, 1998; Chesler, 2000; Garmezy, 1991; O'Leary, Alday, & Ickovics, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Parry and Chesler (2005) use this theoretical framework as the basis of their study, yet expand the concept of growth to the creation of a higher quality of living labeled as "thriving." Their study goal was to better understand "how thriving and resilience are or can be a part of survivorship and how some survivors integrate losses and construct meaning" (Parry & Chesler, 2005, p. 1058). The researchers studied a sample of 50 childhood cancer survivors and chose a design that would document the experiences of positive psycho-spiritual change, facilitate a discussion of how the survivors created meaning out of their experiences, and provide possible explanations of thriving. In order of prevalence, the participants reported an increased psychological maturity, greater compassion and empathy, new values and priorities, and new strengths. Survivors asserted that they "became more optimistic and better able to deal with loss, change, and challenges as a result of cancer" (p. 1067). The findings, suggesting that "processes of coping, meaning making, and psycho-spiritual growth are intimately related to

long-term psychosocial well-being," have significant implications for professionals working with this population (p.1055).

Within a similar theoretical framework, Wheeler (1999) embarked on a study to explore how bereaved parents experience the crisis of meaning after a child's death, and the meaning they find in life after the death. Although no insight was offered into the search for meaning, Wheeler (2001) acknowledged that the process of meaning making is an important aspect of readjustment and should be considered a vital component of grief counseling. Literature regarding bereavement indicates that healing begins with "telling of the story" (Danforth & Glass, 2001, p.515). Under this premise, Danforth and Glass (2001) designed their research study of middle-aged women who had been widowed longer than one year, with methods conducive to the creation of interactive dialogue guided to encourage meaning-making. Questions were designed to move the six women through the process of initial trauma through reflection in an effort to examine how these women made meaning out of their experiences of loss. Similar to the conclusions of other studies, this research revealed a need or desire for some individuals who have experienced a crisis to make meaning of the experience and gain a sense of resolution and reinvestment in their lives.

Three assumptions guiding research and clinical intervention strategies for people coping with trauma are: (1) people confronting trauma inevitably search for meaning, (2) over time most are able to find meaning and put the issue aside, and (3) finding meaning is critical for adjustment and healing (Davis, 2000). However, the results of the review do not fully or consistently substantiate these assumptions. Instead, results indicate that not everyone searches for meaning, a significant proportion of individuals do not find meaning even when sought, and those who find meaning are better adjusted than those who search but are unable to find meaning, and most people do not put the issue aside and move on (Davis, 2000). In spite of the complexity of the concept of thriving and meaning making, one major theme has

emerged. The significance of meaning making is a reoccurring theme in the literature pertinent to thriving and a contributing factor for the well-being of individuals post-trauma (Ferguson, Richie, Gomez, 2004; Cohen, Hettle, Armeli, & Cimboric, 1998; Landsman, 1997; Davis, 2000).

2.1.1.6 Turning Trauma Into a Positive Outcome

Stepping beyond recovery, thriving or posttraumatic growth to an altruistic state is theory development in its infancy. Studying individuals who have managed to go beyond recovery and attain a positive outcome from their personal tragedy is an underdeveloped phenomenon that has the potential to benefit individuals, practitioners, policy makers, and supporters. “The world is filled with millions of men, women, and children who, with strength and courage, grace and humor, resolve and hard work, rise above their pain and live in the face of continued suffering” (O’Leary, 1998, p. 425). O’Leary studied the ways in which researchers are contributing to the paradigm shift from the vulnerability/deficit models to focus on triumph and strength rising from tragedy (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Seligman’s study of learned optimism indicates that the ways in which people view their negative experiences or challenges is learned early in life (1990). Furthermore, Seligman writes that people can be taught to perceive negative events with a positive outlook (1990). Seligman’s study was an important contribution to the paradigm shift of viewing individuals post-traumatically as vulnerable and ill to viewing them as potentially possessing the ability to go beyond their pre-trauma status to obtaining strength. For example, Girasek wrote about bereaved parents whose children died from accidents and found the strength to champion campaigns aimed at preventing future deaths (2003). Girasek interviewed the parents who helped implement national initiatives aimed at preventing drunk driving, drowning, crib deaths, strangulations due to drawstrings, and firearm deaths and described their accomplishments (2003). A study by McMillen, Smith, and Fisher (1997) examined individuals’ perceived benefits after experiencing a traumatic event, finding that perceived benefit was positively associated

with post-trauma adjustment. Armour's qualitative study examines meaning making in the aftermath of homicide (2003). Armour (2003) expands the study of the meaning making process by interviewing 38 members of 14 families affected by homicide and focusing on meaning making grounded in action. The actions of survivors in an attempt to create meaning "either benefit others or give significance to the survivor's life" (Armour, 2003, p.534). Cohen's study delineated various domains in which thriving or stress-related growth could occur through life philosophy, interpersonal relationships, coping, and spirituality (1998). In a study of 1,000 adults, 21% of the sample reported a traumatic event (such as a robbery, assault, or traumatic death of a loved one) during the previous year and 69% reported the occurrence of at least one such event in their lifetimes (Norris, 1992). Clearly, the exploration of perceived benefits and growth opportunities from tragedy has its place in social science.

2.1.1.7 Research Limitations

Most of the research based on self-report questionnaires, has failed to report reliability, factor structure and validity (Cohen, Cimolic, Armeli & Hettler, 1998). Furthermore, both the Stress Related Growth Scale and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory were developed with college student participants, which is not a representative sample (Cohen, Cimolic, Hettle, and Armeli, 1998). Measuring the positive effects of trauma is difficult, laden with conceptual and methodological challenges. The measurement of factors contributing to the advancement of thriving is still in the developing stages. Measurements designed to assess the factors contributing to the ability of some to create a positive macro-level outcome from a personal tragedy would be at the forefront of this research. Most studies are cross-sectional. These studies, thus far, lack baseline or pre-trauma functioning, short-term factors post-trauma, long-term factors post-trauma, and factors contributing to the successful attainment of macro-level triumphs.

2.1.1.8 Conclusion

The results of these studies lend credibility to the importance of the process of posttraumatic growth and the significance of professionals guiding individuals through the process of recovery and reinvestment in the future. The failure to measure or explore pre-trauma factors or personality characteristics of the individuals is a limitation of studies, which weakens causal conclusions and needs to be explored in research. Questions arise such as: Why do some individuals experience posttraumatic growth and others do not? Do people perceive themselves stronger as a result of helping others post trauma? What are the factors prevalent in those who manage to create positive macro-level outcomes? How can professionals help individuals to experience posttraumatic growth? The evidence that men and women may use somewhat different approaches for coping with traumatic events, and that, on average women are more likely to experience posttraumatic growth than men needs to be further explored (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The finding that “perceived benefits soon after the negative event predicted adjustment several years later” (McMillen, Smith and Fisher, 1997, p. 737) has important implications for professionals helping those who have been impacted by trauma. Furthermore, a consistent theme emerged throughout the research in that participants indicated that helping others was an activity that provided meaning to their lives after experiencing trauma. Future research opportunities in the area of exploring this altruistic phenomenon can have positive implications for the individual recovering from trauma, as well as greatly contributing to society. Professional safety advocates have acknowledged that surviving family members have made powerful allies in affecting positive changes (Berman, 1996; Brown, 1993; McLoughlin & Ferrell, 2000). With the recognition that individuals who go beyond their pain and use their personal tragedy as an impetus for positive change contribute significantly to the benefits of others, research focusing on these triumphs can enhance the efforts of

practitioners helping individuals post-traumatically to traverse the road to posttraumatic growth, and create positive meaning from tragedy.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The overarching approach of the proposed study is designed from a strength model. The previously discussed concepts (recovery, resilience, thriving, meaning making, and posttraumatic growth) have provided the foundation for the framework. In research literature regarding the implications of trauma, the concept of turning a personal traumatic event into a positive outcome for others is yet to be investigated or guided by an existing theoretical framework. The concept of creating positive macro-level outcomes from personal tragedies appears to be most closely related to the literature on posttraumatic growth. However, the emerging concept of posttraumatic growth stops short of examining why some individuals work to better the situations of others after they have experienced trauma. As described earlier, posttraumatic growth tends to occur in five general areas. Sometimes people who face major life crises develop a sense that new opportunities emerged from the struggle, opening up possibilities that were not present before. A second area is a change in relationships with others. Some people experience closer relationships, and they can also experience an increased sense of connection to others who suffer. A third area of possible change is an increased sense of one's own strength. A fourth aspect of posttraumatic growth experienced by some people is a greater appreciation for life in general. The fifth area involves spiritual or religious changes (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Recognizing that traumatic studies have not resulted in specific, sequential stages of recovery, nor suggesting that trauma follows a standard progression, the qualitative study utilizes a framework guided by the concept of posttraumatic growth and the exploration of alternative explanations for this phenomenon.

Additionally, borrowing from a theory that is based on sequential progress, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory will be explored and challenged. Maslow theorized that the final level of psychological development that can be achieved when all basic and mental needs are fulfilled and the "actualization" of the full personal potential takes place is self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). Self-actualization is characterized by personal growth and fulfillment. The study will explore the possibility that a level beyond Maslow's self-actualization exists when an individual reaches beyond oneself for the benefit of others, and that the pinnacle of psychological development is at a higher plane than Maslow's fifth level of the pyramid of needs. The possibility that some individuals can be catapulted into a purely altruistic plane from the depths of trauma, and the potential of an intrinsic or innate need existing in some individuals will be considered.

Lacking tailored theory for posttraumatic growth coupled with positive macro-level outcomes, the following three theories are also explored to provide possible explanations for human development and behavior in this arena. However, the following theories fall short of explaining why individuals embark on difficult endeavors to develop organizations, influence law or fight injustices that will benefit others, but will not change their personal circumstances. Additionally, these theories do not explore how some face the obstacles to better society while others do not. One glimpse into the motivation of individuals to help others without the apparent reciprocal benefit may be explained by a moral model. Lawrence Kohlberg (1958) expanded Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development from three stages to six stages of moral development, based on cognitive reasoning. However, Kohlberg's theory has more to do with moral thinking than moral action. In order to analyze motivation and action, the exploration of thought processes is a logical foundation to build upon. Kohlberg (1973) theorizes that at stages five and six of moral development, people are less concerned with maintaining society for its

own sake and more concerned with the principles and values that make a good society. He theorizes that individuals reaching the fifth stage of moral development are working toward a conception of a good society. Individuals in this stage of moral development believe that individual rights should be protected and democratic processes should settle disputes about what is right. However, he suggests that a democratic process alone does not always result in outcomes that people intuitively sense are just. A majority, for instance, may vote for a law that hinders a minority. This dilemma is a situation some study participants have encountered in their efforts to affect change. For example, a gun control activist who lost his son to someone who legally obtained a high-powered gun will come into conflict with those who believe such weapons should be made available to all citizens. Kohlberg believes there must be a higher stage that defines the principles by which justice is achieved. His sixth stage of moral development, universal ethical principles, suggests that justice requires people to treat the claims of all parties in an impartial manner, respecting the basic dignity of all individuals (1973). The principles of justice are therefore universal in that they apply to all. At this stage, people follow internalized principles of justice, even if they conflict with laws and rules of society (Crain, 1985).

Kohlberg's theory has provoked a good deal of criticism. "Not everyone is enthusiastic about the concept of a post-conventional morality" (Crain, 1985, p. 132). Stage six reasoning was never substantiated in interviews. Kohlberg created it as an "ideal" and pointed to examples such as Gandhi to support its existence (Daeg de Mott, 2001). After a tremendous amount of criticism over the fact that stage six was purely hypothetical, Kohlberg removed it from the empirical stages but retained it as a theoretical construct in the realm of philosophical speculation (Daeg de Mott, 2001). In regard to Kohlberg's research, Hogan (1973) wrote about a concern over the dangers of people placing their own principles above society and the law. Again, some study participants have faced opposition to changes they worked to influence.

Kohlberg's theory describes how some individuals may believe changes should occur within a society, but does not contend with why some individuals take action on their moral beliefs and others do not. Furthermore, the theory does not offer an explanation of action taken as a result of personal tragedy or how the negative experience affects moral transformation. It does, however, address how some individuals are able to empathize with and support the changes others initiate.

In regard to action, the theories of altruism are examined in an effort to explore alternative explanations for those who help others with no obvious personal profit. Is altruism a part of human nature or are people motivated by varying degrees of self interest as many theorists believe? The issue of altruism is complicated by the lack of agreement about many aspects of it, including its very definition. The word altruism was coined in 1851 by Auguste Comte to refer to benevolence. Although not everyone agrees on the intricacies of altruism, the most basic definition is that the act of altruism is seeking the welfare of others (Marsh, 2002). According to Daniel Batson (1991), altruism is a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare. The early altruism theorists argued that anything that appears to be motivated by concern for someone else's needs will, under closer scrutiny, prove to have ulterior selfish motives (Piliavin & Charng, 1990). As social work scholar Jerome Wakefield (1993) has shown, the majority of social science theories explain altruistic behavior primarily in non-altruistic terms. He writes that the theoretical explanations describe how apparently altruistic behaviors are not really altruistic at their core (Marsh, 2002). Evolutionary theorists believe that a sense of social concern is a pre-adapted, genetically programmed attribute (Trivers, 1971; Hamilton, 1964). It is a basic component of human nature that helps to ensure the survival of the species according to these theorists. Psychoanalytic and social learning theorists argue that an individual's altruistic inclinations are learned, not derived from his or her genes (Bandura, 1989, Eisenburg, Fabes & Spinrad, 2006). They believe altruism is cultivated

from personal experiences. Cognitive developmental theorists agree with the latter point of view, but add that the kind and frequency of a person's altruistic acts depend in part on his or her level of social cognitive development (Schaffer, 2009). Researchers are recognizing that one of the reasons people act with kindness and generosity is that they desire to help others and that helping others makes them feel good (Marsh, 2002). This motive is the self-interested one, feeling better by reducing another person's distress. Wakefield points out that it is possible to have more than one set of desires at the same time. As Wakefield notes, it is possible to understand altruism by drawing a distinction between a first-order desire for another's welfare and a second-order desire that may be self-interested. Thus, the enigma regarding altruism results from confusing two separate desires as one (Marsh, 2002).

A search for studies involving the investigation of traits describing an altruistic personality, revealed inconsistent relationships in general between personality characteristics and altruistic behavior. However, some authors have cited people high in self esteem, high in competence, high in moral internal locus of control, low in need of approval, and high in moral development appear to be more likely to engage in altruistic behavior (Staub, 1978, Aronoff & Wilson, 1984, Piliavin et al, 1981, Rushton, 1981, Piliavin & Charng, 1990). According to social learning theory, behaviors can be learned through observation of others who are referred to as models (Bandura, 1977). If this is the case, can altruistic behavior motivated by pain be modeled or taught? Can youth and adults learn from modeling how to turn suffering into altruistic action? Does this form of altruism help or harm the individual? What explains altruistic action in people who did not have this type of behavior modeled? These are areas worth exploring. Should it be determined that altruism can indeed be modeled, the implications could be significant. The argument remains among theorists of whether altruism truly exists, because only the individual can know his or her own intentions and the individuals may not consciously understand their own intentions. The study attempts to better understand altruistic intentions of

individuals who continue to work for the betterment of others, and they were asked to reflect on their intentions. The study participants range from 3 to 42 years post trauma. Currently, studies have not focused on pre-existing factors or characteristics that may serve as catalysts for an individual to take action post trauma. The pre-existing factors of individuals who achieve a positive macro-level outcome may or may not be consistent. The qualitative study attempted to categorize any consistent factors or patterns derived from the interviews.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH APPROACH

In this under-developed area of research, a qualitative methods study allowed the exploration of patterns and themes that revealed why some people are able to go beyond a traumatic experience and create a positive macro-level outcome. Understanding what factors influence a person's ability to reach past their own pain and how these individuals are able to make this contribution to society is a worthy research goal that may benefit not only society, but individuals who experience trauma. The following research approaches facilitated the exploration of these questions.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What characteristics and attributes do individuals who created positive macro-level outcomes possess?
2. How were these individuals impacted by their efforts to create a positive macro-level outcome?
3. In what ways did individuals who experienced traumatic events create positive macro-level changes?

The first question allows for exploration of individuals' explanations and opinions of the negative events and the emerging stories that influenced their decisions to make a positive change beyond their personal status to a macro-level achievement. Furthermore, the subsequent interview questions developed to answer this major research question explored pre-trauma factors, short-term post trauma factors, and long-term post trauma factors. As noted earlier, these factors are insufficiently explored in posttraumatic growth studies. Literature is sparse regarding pre-trauma factors that may contribute to an individual's ability to not only

recover, but also create positive macro-level outcomes. The literature, thus far, has focused primarily on factors post-traumatically that contribute to the recovery of an individual.

The second research question addresses the consequences the individuals experienced as a result of their endeavors to influence change. Both positive and negative personal impacts were explored through open-ended interview questions. Some of the interview questions were developed in relation to previous studies delineating personal transformations subsequent to trauma.

The third research question focuses on the factors that contributed to the attainment of macro-level change. The purpose of this question is to understand how these individuals achieved societal-benefiting goals, providing practitioners, policy makers, advocates, and post-traumatic victims with blueprints for future attempts of similar goals. This qualitative research study will contribute knowledge to a scarcely investigated phenomenon by its exploratory nature, and will allow for inductive hypothesis generation.

4.1 Site and Sample

A sample of ten nine individuals, both males and females, were interviewed. These individuals were identified through media outlets such as newspapers, television, magazines, agency publications, public law outlets and references. Since the exploration of pre-trauma factors is one goal of the study, an attempt will be made to interview individuals with varying demographics. Pre-trauma factors that could be observed or discussed with the participant were included. Pre-trauma factors or demographics such as personality types, family dynamics, culture, ethnicity, religion, age, and social dynamics are some of the factors that will be explored to assess whether any patterns emerge from this data. However, the relatively small sample will make it difficult for extensive comparison of these factors. The purposeful sample size was chosen because the availability of individuals whom fit the criteria of having experienced a

traumatic event and influenced or implemented a macro-level outcome is limited. These American individuals are geographically located throughout the nation and internationally, making access to them costly and time intensive. Furthermore, a sample of nine individuals was feasible and manageable in regard to attaining information that is diverse and robust enough to answer the three research questions. Due to the lack of theory in this area of research, the exploratory nature of this study will attempt to inductively generate theory from transpiring patterns and themes. Because the study is exploratory, not attempting to present causality, the sample lends itself to the examination of various traumas, pre-trauma factors, post-trauma factors, and other contributing factors in the attainment of positive macro-level outcomes. The sites for the interviews were at the locations best suited for the comfort of the interviewees. Creating a comfortable atmosphere for them to discuss their stories, and a setting that facilitates the length of the interviews was an objective.

4.1.1 Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Personal interviews, analytic observation notes, and document reviews were the primary collection methods of the research study. The interviews were audio taped for later transcriptions. Documents regarding the individuals' efforts to affect change were read in order to have an understanding of their background prior to the interviews. Additionally, analytic interview observation notes were written during and after the interview with the trauma survivors. These notes contain observations regarding the individual's demeanor, attitudes, and personality characteristics. Observations of this type may provide further insight to the types of people most likely to create a positive outcome after a negative event and reveal the impetus for the change.

Analysis of transcribed interviews were coded, initially guided by the eight categories supported by previous studies regarding recovery, and subsequently coded for emerging themes grounded in the data. Using the grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978) enables the

coding of data to be inductively determined, a necessary component of the analysis due to the lack of prior studies involving individuals who created macro-level change from a negative event. In exploring whether a relationship exists between the types of trauma experienced and the types of outcomes created by the individuals, comparison analysis and categorization were utilized. Understanding the motivations which prompted the individual to action is an important component of the study. Thematic analysis and coding was used to identify the patterns and themes preceding the outcome. Equally important to the study is the process which created the impetus for change. The process the individuals experienced and the avenues of support which culminated in the macro-level outcomes are more thoroughly revealed by exploring connecting strategies and contextual relationships. Observations made during the interviews were also categorized and the observations coded directly after the interview. As the study evolved, the early data was discussed with the research study's chairperson, experienced in qualitative studies, and preliminarily analyzed for patterns and themes, with a discussion of gathering additional information that may have been helpful in assessing the data if there appeared to be gaps in the study. Descriptive statistics will be discussed.

4.1.1.1 Limitations and Other Issues

Designing a research study that extracts beneficial information inevitably contains validity threats that need to be identified and addressed. Triangulation of data collection methods, interviews with the trauma survivors, document reviews, and interview observations, will be used for the validation of data. The research questions state that the outcomes are positive, which indicates a conclusion or assumption that the outcome is viewed as positive to the individual who initiated the change. This assumption may influence the ways in which the participants express the processes they experienced prior to the outcome. The supposition that the final outcome, most consider constructive or positive, may induce participants to only recount the constructive issues. Additionally, the word "positive" may mislead the subjects to

only reveal the triumphs, neglecting the obstacles. For this reason, interview questions were designed to directly ask the participants whether there were any negative or harmful aspects of their endeavors or whether obstacles were experienced. Mindfully neutralizing the interviewer's terminology when discussing the process of recovery was used to help conceal the researcher's expectations and minimize the interviewer's influence. A second threat to validity is the researcher's bias or preconceptions about the anticipated conclusions of the study. Ensuring that interview questions were not leading is vital in addressing this concern. Another validity threat is the potential desire of the interviewees to answer questions in a way they believe are socially acceptable. These individuals have stepped into the public eye and created an outcome that most would consider positive. They may not feel safe to reveal their disappointments or perceived failures. The small sample of individuals has accomplished outcomes that are well known, possibly creating another issue, the lack of anonymity. However, the individuals who were interviewed have spoken publicly regarding their tragedies and the issues they advocated for or against. If the entire process of recovery and action is not fully and accurately explored, the conclusions will lack validity and strength.

Memory is a key construct in the examination of the effects of trauma and requires the tedious and careful reconstructing of the experience over time. Because memory is sometimes difficult to recall, especially after times of trauma, the memories of events and perceptions could pose some inaccuracies. Protecting against the threat of validity that exists when a researcher anticipates the conclusions because of over-identification may be handled by soliciting feedback and conclusions from the people being studied. Additionally, the assumption that the individual has in fact recovered poses a validity threat. The data may reveal that the undertaking of macro-level change may not be correlated with recovery or may have induced harm, setting the individual back. To address this concern, the research study approached with an understanding that the assumption may not be valid, therefore, introducing the concept of recovery to the

individual and asking for their feedback. The open-ended questions are limited, and the conversation was guided by the information given by the interviewee as well. The small sample size limits generalization, but is large enough to extrapolate information from the exploratory study in which grounded theory is being used. Confidentiality is a concern due to the fact that some of the individuals could be identified by their particular stories. Individuals will be asked whether this is a concern to them and addressed if there are issues. These individuals have spoken publicly about their tragedy and efforts in influencing or implementing a change, and some have written books and articles or have been interviewed by media prior to the study. The study posed no other apparent ethical concerns. Interviewees were given an informed consent and any concerns were discussed. In the study, participants may choose “to own their own stories” (Patton, 2002, p. 411). Therefore, the confidentiality section may not apply. The study design and interview questions were provided to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. A discussion of conversational interviewing was addressed with the IRB with an assurance that questions posed would not go beyond the boundaries of the study. All IRB training was completed prior to implementing the study. All mandates by the IRB were incorporated and followed.

4.2 Summary

Coping with tragedy and trauma is unfortunately an occurrence many people will experience in their lifetimes. Studying the ways in which people process the trauma and recover to pre-trauma conditions contributes to the helping professions’ abilities to guide individuals post-trauma. Conducting a research study of individuals who experienced a trauma and created a positive outcome, could not only build upon the knowledge of the benefits of recovering from a negative event, but additionally provide a blueprint of various successes in which practitioners, policy makers and individuals who have experienced trauma can model and gain inspiration. The research opportunity in the area of exploring this altruistic phenomenon

can have positive implications for the individual recovering from trauma, as well as greatly contributing to society. As more knowledge contributes to the understanding of who achieves positive outcomes from negative events, as well as how they achieved the outcome, the construction of interventions or programs to strengthen the factors contributing to the success is encouraging. In relation to theory development, the proposed study may potentially explore a level of human development that has been underdeveloped. For instance, in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, the self-actualization explanation which is essentially the pinnacle of human development, does not explain why an individual would achieve such great accomplishments from the roots of suffering. Instead, theory does not yet provide explanation for this level of achievement. If certain factors exist, do humans possess an innate desire to protect others from suffering the same tragedy even if they do not act on the desire? The study explored the positive implications of those who did act on the desire to implement change as well as the consequences of their actions.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

5.1 Participants' Backgrounds

A sample of nine individuals participated in the qualitative study exploring the motivations and abilities of these participants who experienced trauma and created positive outcomes for others. Questions were also asked of them that explored the personal benefits and harms they experienced as a result of their efforts to affect positive change for others. These individuals are all public in their endeavors and were therefore identified through the media, organizations or individuals who were aware of their work. Before contacting the individuals, books or other written information they authored, media interviews or their internet websites were read and viewed to gain information about their stories and organizations. Each individual participated in an in-depth, structured interview involving open-ended questions in order to allow the individual to expand their explanations. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audio-taped and lasted between one to two hours. Immediately following each interview, the interviewer wrote field notes regarding personal insights and participants' observed emotions, behaviors, and personality characteristics. However, one interview took place over the telephone due to the fact that the participant was located in Africa. The other eight interviews were conducted in five different states. Four interviews were conducted in the participants' offices, two were conducted in coffee shops, one in a hotel lobby, and one took place in the participant's home. The interviewer gave the participants the option of choosing where they felt most comfortable meeting. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Emerging themes were identified, and core and subthemes have been incorporated, as well as rich quotes and narrative descriptions. Because the study is exploratory in nature, the structured interview questions directed the exploration into the following areas: How they began;

What motivated them; Personal benefits and harms; and Personal traits pre-trauma in an effort to analyze whether certain characteristics emerge.

The sample consisted of six females and three males. (See Figure 1) The participants in the study experienced traumas that they said propelled them to help others. The traumas experienced by these individuals were: The loss of a child to murder, suicide, accidental death and death by a distracted driver; Imprisonment and torture during the Vietnam War for 5 ½ years; Child’s long-term illness including heart attacks and special needs; Soldier wounded in war and living with a prosthetic limb; Abandonment, homelessness and abuse as a child.

Table 5.1 Sex and Ages of Participants

Participants	Sex	30-39 Years	40-49 Years	50-59 Years	60+ Years
P1	Male	1			
P2	Female				1
P3	Female		1		
P4	Female		1		
P5	Female			1	
P6	Male			1	
P7	Female		1		
P8	Male				1
P9	Female		1		

In an attempt to better understand how the participants began their efforts to help people on a macro-level, they were asked to explain how they created their organizations. Three individuals were originally asked to speak and five individuals initiated their actions to “turn something very negative into something positive.” For those individuals who said they were originally asked to speak, they all expressed having thought about “doing something to help others” prior to being asked to tell their stories. One individual was asked by a senator to testify within three months of her child’s death in an effort to help pass a law intended to prevent future deaths.

“I testified, and that was about all I could do. And I really wasn’t very functioning at that point.”

The other two participants were asked by leaders in organizations in which they had both participated and their stories and encouragement helped particular populations. The six individuals who created their organizations prior to being asked by others began by speaking to the public, interviewing with journalists, and networking. Two participants who have influenced law and created a non-profit organization were motivated when many people told them they were doing something in honor of their deceased child, and they were motivated by the call-to-action of many. The means in which participants were able to initially reach out to others were by: speaking to groups, the media or legislators; obtaining a grant; educating themselves in regard to creating a 501(c)3; writing a book; partnering with an organization already established; creating original non-profit organizations; and raising money to support the agency or organization.

To present a fully encompassing explanation of the study results, it is also important to provide the background of each participant’s journey. The participants discussed in this study have been given pseudo-names. Jay is an Iraq War veteran who was wounded by an explosive that hit him while riding in an artillery vehicle and lost a limb. After his stay in the Veteran’s Hospital Jay attended school and was unaware that he had posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because he was told that the symptoms he was experiencing were normal reactions. Although he exhibited symptoms of PTSD, he did not fully realize the implications until a college professor showed the class a film without explaining the content of the film. The video started in a middle-eastern region and followed with an explosion. He and two other veterans, whom he was unaware of as fellow veterans, had dramatic physical and emotional reactions to the film. He realized that his symptoms were indeed post-trauma related. He joined a group that was designed to help wounded soldiers experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder. Later, Jay was

asked to speak to subsequent groups of wounded veterans. He began speaking to the groups, and the groups' retention rates dramatically increased. He then went on to create an organization at a major university, was funded by an organization helping wounded soldiers help others, became a peer mentor, was appointed by the governor to a state board that oversees disability services and laws, and continues to volunteer and organize special projects.

Mary discovered the body of her college-aged daughter on the floor of her living room. She had committed suicide. Mary learned that her daughter had been raped by an acquaintance and fallen into depression while away at college. Mary and her husband were unaware of both the rape and depression. Mary delved into literature regarding grief, sexual assault, suicide and depression. She became astonished by the numbers and started speaking to college women. She then received a grant to travel internationally educating young women on college campuses. She also started speaking to college men and was again surprised by the number of men who confided in her that they too had been sexually molested in their lifetime. She began to educate young men and women regarding the importance of receiving counseling and attempting to diminish any stigmas of going to a professional and how to identify signs of abuse and depression in others.

Erin lost her young son in an accident involving a four-wheeler. Within months of her son's death, she began developing a non-profit organization to raise money and awards students scholarships to attend college. Her annual memorial scholarship tournament has raised over a quarter million dollars toward the education of young men and women in her community. She has also helped educate others with the process of creating foundations.

Sarah was nearing her home when she arrived at the scene of her daughter's accident. Her daughter was riding her bike when she was hit by a driver distracted by her cell phone. Sarah's daughter died, and within three months of her death Sarah was testifying before a state legislature advocating for stricter distracted-driving laws. Her efforts resulted in penalties for cell

phone distracted driving. Sarah went on to become an original board member of a national distracted driver related organization and continues to speak locally and nationally, as well as on nationally recognized media programs. The distracted driver organization is the first of its kind and informs and educates the public, advocates for laws, provides statistics, and is a support outlet for victims and survivors.

Kathy and Mark's daughter was an advocate for women's rights and fought for greater support for victims of domestic abuse. In a shocking and tragic twist, Kathy and Mark's daughter was killed by her ex-boyfriend. Their efforts to advocate to influence stronger domestic violence laws and to educate young women began quickly after their daughter's funeral. Their initial creation of a website, soon after their daughter's funeral, was inspired by thousands of individuals stating that they were going to do something positive in honor of their daughter, served as one of the factors that was the impetus for creating the organization. Both took on roles of speaking nationally, testifying, and creating an organization that has become a major conduit of change and education. Mark also speaks to groups of male abusers.

Linda's infant was put in intensive care and stayed in the hospital for one and a half years, experiencing heart attacks and numerous life-threatening events and special needs. Linda created a children's center in a slum of Africa to help special needs children and their mothers. She has worked to educate the residents where her center is located in regard to viewing special needs children as valued and has helped to educate the children and provide services for them. She has also created an organization in which the mothers earn money to help their families and any extra money received goes toward supporting the center.

Darren, a Navy pilot, was shot down during the Vietnam War. He was captured, imprisoned and tortured for five and a half years. Darren returned to the United States and within six months, he was back in a cockpit and within one year he was asked if he would voluntarily speak and teach other military personnel in survival school. After retiring from the

Navy he was asked to speak to a local group. After speaking to many groups, he decided that he did not want to just tell stories. He wanted them to have meaning for others in a positive way that could possibly help them cope and overcome adversities. He went on to author a book. He travels nationally speaking, consulting and mentoring.

As a child, Rachael and her siblings were abused by her parents. At the age of five, her mother took her and her siblings across the country living in abandoned apartments or their car. At the age of eight, her mother abandoned them and they begged for food and they searched for bottles and shopping carts to earn change to buy peanut butter and bread. She was eventually taken to a residential home. Thirty-five years later, she read an article about homeless children in her community. Shocked that there were homeless children in her community, she began to search for ways to provide food for them and the chronically hungry in her area. She created a non-profit organization that provides backpacks full of ready-to-eat food for the weekends when they are not in school. In just a few years, she and her many volunteers have managed to fill thousands of backpacks and feed hundreds of children. She has expanded the program to providing sack lunches in the summertime, along with activities for the children and teenagers.

5.1.1 Themes

An unexpected theme that emerged from the interviews was the brief amount of time between the participants' traumas and embarking on their endeavors to create something positive from the adversities. Two individuals started creating organizations within weeks of their loss, and two others began within three months. Three participants began helping others within a year of the incident. Rachael developed her organization 40 years after becoming homeless and chronically hungry, but expressed that her initial thought to help others was a few years after becoming an adult. Linda created the children's center 11 years after experiencing adversity, but expressed she has not viewed her situation as traumatic. The most frequently

and consistently used words to describe why they began helping others and continue their work were: God, help others, serve, responsibility, mission, keeping memory alive, faith, healing, prevent tragedy for others, not letting death be in vain, guilt at thought of quitting, and turning negative into positive. The overarching theme extrapolated from the interviews was the need to help others. Subthemes emerged that were intertwined, but appeared to ultimately return to the basic idea of helping others.

5.1.1.1 Need to Help Others

Several participants have become very knowledgeable regarding the issue that caused the death of their loved one or the adversities experienced. They have developed reputations as experts in their areas and are viewed as very effective advocates for their causes. Those participants expressed a fundamental need to help others.

“When I started learning about it, beyond just my daughter being murdered, there are a lot of people’s daughters murdered every day, every year. I’m driven to educate everyone else because nobody wants to figure it out the way I did. Somewhere it transitioned from being just about (my daughter) to about everybody else’s daughters. I feel some kind of an obligation that I can do this. I feel that it has nothing to do about grieving anymore. I just feel like this is what I am supposed to do.”

Another participant who has educated herself regarding the issue she passionately advocates, also expressed the dire need she feels to prevent others from experiencing the same tragedy.

“I have to spread the word. Three hundred and fifty people a week are dying due to phone distracted-related accidents. That’s why I have to keep doing this. That’s why I have to keep talking.”

The theme of responsibility and passion was also expressed by participants, intermingled with their need and desire to help others.

“I felt that I owed it to them to tell the whole story. I felt there was such a need out there. I was worried so many of them had been raped or would be raped that I wanted them to know that this has happened to someone else, and you can get help. I really want to end the stigma of going to a counselor. I felt like I could really be of help. I felt like (my daughter) would not have died in vain if something good could have come out of this tragedy.”

Again, the ideal of responsibility was reflected in Mark’s explanation for his continued efforts and the guilt of any thought of not continuing.

“Literally, I think that when I’m on my dying bed that they handed me the baton, and I dropped it and went over and sat down. So when you think about this, we understand that most murdered victims’ families don’t have the connections (resources) we have...So there is a responsibility to use that in a good way.”

Additionally, an interconnected theme articulated by some participants expressing their need to help others included the desire for the loss of their child not to be in vain. Not all participants expressed this. However, those who expressed it did not mention it as their primary motivation, but rather ended their explanation with the statement.

When asked what motivated him to continue to speak to groups of people, Darren said that “there was no great altruistic reason for it” at first. After Darren was initially asked to speak, he decided that he “did not want to just tell stories,” but wanted his experience to have meaning for others.

“I said if I am going to speak, there has to be a reason. I want it to mean something. That’s when I really started trying to think about my experience in a way of what could be learned from it or what is of value for others. How people could vicariously take something away from that. They make connections to their lives...I tell them they all have stories. That’s just the way life is.”

Jay discussed his need to continue serving after he lost a limb during the war in Iraq and reflects his prior desire to help and serve.

“There’s some reason why we (soldiers) are serving. So to lose that is kind of traumatic. It gives me a sense of fulfillment that I am helping others.”

5.1.1.2 Spirituality

A prominent theme in their motivations to help others was faith, strength gained from God, and the desire to follow His direction. When Linda was asked what motivated her to develop a children’s center in Africa, she said, “My number one motivator would be because I want to serve the Lord.” She went on to say, “My number two would be, in Africa children with disabilities are considered cursed by the witch doctor for lack of better word. They are referred to as dogs and they are considered contagious.”

“I really believe God calls His followers to feed the poor, take care of the widows and to love those that society rejects. And so I just saw a great need for it and because I have a son with special needs, obviously it hits home in my heart. But I think the two biggest reasons were I was really feeling like God put that in my heart, and I wanted to obey Him. And then secondly, just seeing the need here to really create things for kids who really don’t have anything and for their moms too.”

Rachael, whose time between being abandoned, homeless, and begging for food and creating an organization to feed homeless and chronically hungry children was 35 years later. She also attributed her desire to help children and the strength she has as based in faith.

“After I read the article about the homeless kids here...it was almost as if He punched me in the stomach and said, hello. Has your life gotten so comfortable and so easy that you can’t remember what you went through? I was like, ouch. Okay God what do you want me to do? And just one thing after another, I just got started.”

When Mary was asked what she attributed to her ability to achieve her goal she stated it this way:

“It just goes back to God. I’m getting choked up just saying that. I just have such a strong faith, and I just don’t think I could do that if I didn’t believe this is something He wanted me to do. So that’s just where I get my strength from. Definitely.”

Other references to faith and strength were expressed by a participant as: “I don’t know how I could do this without faith.” Another expressed it by saying: “A lot of people ask me, ‘how do you do that’? And I have one answer. And it is God. God gives me my strength.” After speaking, Darren said if people ask him whether he had faith when he was a prisoner of war, he is tells them about how his faith helped him through the lengthy ordeal.

5.1.1.3 Honoring and Keeping Memory Alive

The theme of keeping a memory alive was expressed in this way:

“Just basically wanted to keep his memory alive, and that was the one way that I knew. And to be able to give the scholarship funds to kids. You know someday they can look back and think they got to go to college because of him. I never worried about us forgetting him. I just worried about everyone else forgetting him, and that was one thing that I knew would keep him alive in everyone else’s heart as well as my own.”

For those who lost a child, the desire to create and continue something that represented the character or passions of their child was expressed as well.

“He was such a giving child and would never leave anyone out. I just wanted to continue that for him as much as for myself.”

Mark talked about his inspiration by saying:

“There is some symbolic nature in this (her death). Here is a woman that at a young life was driven to protect women, driven to do things to protect women’s

rights...She had been an advocate for women, sexual assault and domestic violence victims. And she died in a way that was a symbol of her work.”

When discussing her daughter’s passion, Kathy expressed her activist direction in honor of her daughter in the following way.

“And of course that is part of what (her daughter) worked to fight against as well. She served as a sexual assault advocate, a volunteer advocate. She just worked on women’s issues most of her college life. It was her passion. And so we decided maybe we need to focus our efforts and not quit. And that’s how (organization) was born. She modeled the way for me.”

5.1.1.4 Healing

As echoed in Jay’s earlier statement, others expressed that they believed telling their stories and helping others would be healing or fulfilling, but secondary to helping others.

“I really felt like it would be healing to me to be able to go through the story, but mainly because I love the college students so much and wanted to help them in any way.”

Healing was mentioned more when asked about personal benefits rather than when asked what the motivating factors were prior to beginning their efforts.

5.1.1.5 Personal Implications

After discussing the motivating factors that contributed to their efforts to turn something negative into something positive, they were asked whether their efforts have helped them personally. The participants expressed that their efforts have been therapeutic, healing, positive, fulfilling, initially helped with grief, and keeps them busy.

“It has helped me tremendously. I have often wondered what my life would be like if I hadn’t done this. It has helped me so much to tell the story over and over.”

Although not expressed as a motivating factor for testifying for the senate, speaking publicly and co-boarding a non-profit organization, Sarah said that it has helped with her grief.

“I speak as often as I can emotionally handle it. I think talking about her helps me with my grieving even though it is so hard when I speak. The feedback I get, I crave that.”

A few expressed that their work keeps them busy and their minds off of themselves.

“It keeps me busy, keeps me focused. I don’t have very much time to sit around and feel sorry for myself.”

The feedback they receive was mentioned as an important factor.

“The payoff is when people come up and say, ‘I will never do that again. You touched my heart. I am going to pay it forward. You are saving lives.’ So when they tell me that, it tells me I am doing the right thing.”

The recurrent benefit conveyed is being able to help others on a wide scale from the depths of their own pain.

“Just being able to say yes, this ugly thing happened but because of it, look at all of the good.”

Erin also expressed this sentiment that helping others through pain has value.

“We (have the memorial fund raiser) on his birthday to help get through the day, and make something positive on his birthday. So it’s on his birthday every year. It is a lot of work. But in the end it’s worth it to be able to know that he’s still helping kids.”

Kathy discussed that she believes her efforts were initially helpful in the grieving process, but reflects a few others by stating it appears to have a limited time value.

“I think initially it really did help me personally. I really think those first few months it was about, you don’t want them to just be dead. You want people to

remember. You don't want people to forget. So I think it did help in the grieving process."

Interestingly, when asked whether they felt that their efforts had harmed them in any way, eight participants said, "no harm" without hesitation. Then upon giving the question more consideration, they mentioned the toll it takes on them emotionally and physically. Earlier, one of the benefits cited was that they felt their efforts helped them with their grief initially. For those who lost a loved one, the initial benefit became a weighty responsibility, according to all of those participants. A few individuals mentioned that the benefit lasts for approximately the first six months.

"I think it would have six to eight months, maybe a year, helped. After that it becomes a burden. When I speak, I know that it moves people and there is some reward afterwards."

The amount of energy and the effects their efforts have on them was discussed by participants. Five participants discussed how emotionally and physically burdening the days surrounding their most public activities are for them.

"I have to limit the amount of times I speak because the day before, the day of, and the day after, I'm kind of a mess. Emotionally, it's really hard on me. For three days I don't eat well, and I don't sleep well. It's a sacrifice."

Three participants expressed how difficult it is when people tell them that what they are doing must help them with their grief.

"I get this a lot. People say, 'I'm sure that it helps in your grieving.' I used to let it go. But now I have started to say, no it's probably harmful to the grieving process because you can't move on. It's just always there. I relive her death all the time by choice. So I can't fuss about it."

Another expressed the frustration in the following way.

“The toll it takes on me physically, I can tell you it does not help you grieve. It does not make you feel better. It takes a toll on you.”

Most participants stated that they experienced exhaustion. Other words used in expressing the harms they felt were sleep deprivation, out of balance, and a toll emotionally and physically.

“It was harmful in the sense that, for a short period of time, my life got out of balance. It was all consuming. It took all of my energy, so at the end of the day I had nothing left. I was so drained that I didn’t have anything left for my family.”

When discussing the harmful effects of their efforts, they talked about time away from family as a sacrifice and strenuous.

5.2 Attributions

One hundred percent of the participants, when asked what they attribute to helping them accomplish their goal, credited their spouse as one of the reasons for their success in carrying out their desires. The majority also pointed to their faith as an explanation for their success. Other sources of support were family and friends. Many of them also cited the opportunities to share their stories frequently as a contributing factor to their well-being as well as receiving validation from strangers. The Iraq War veteran expressed that the pivotal turning point for him was when a fellow amputee showed up in his hospital room and demonstrated how active he could be and answered even the most basic questions. Mary recounts the time a 20 year old college student encouraged her after she spoke to male college students for the first time. Rachael remembers the people along the way who were a positive influence and attributes them with providing her with hope as a child. Darren summed up his attributes for getting through the ordeal in Vietnam in the following way:

“There was a lot of group therapy. I mean we weren’t going anywhere. We were locked up and we would pick any subject. We would talk about it forever. It was kind of

hard at Hanoi, but it was nothing to it coming home. And I think it was because in our own ways, we had processed it so much. We were in good shape psychologically and emotionally. Guys whose wives divorced them while they were there... And when we figured that out, we processed, you know, it got processed. It was like a support group. So we talked, we talked, we talked... He went through the various stages of grief. He was mad. By the time we got back to the United States, he was fine. My dad died while I was over there. And we figured that out. We talked and talked and talked. I told every story about my dad you can imagine. And they listened and they asked questions. And so I have come to believe over the years that we were created in such a way that we do not do well up here. (He pointed to his head). Stuff just goes around every which way. You know we were created to process outside of ourselves, either verbally or in writing.”

Darren used this story to illustrate why he believes processing is beneficial, and it is what he contributes as being a significant reason he has done so well emotionally, mentally and physically.

The participants all made reference to their personalities pre-trauma. All three men described themselves as athletes at a younger age, and competitive in that they do not allow obstacles to hinder their efforts. In fact, all added that the obstacles add an extra incentive to reach their goal. At least one of the following terms was used in the participants’ descriptions of themselves: public servant, people person, optimistic, caretaker, nurturer, grounded in faith, doer, hands-on, creative, leader, visionary, real go-getter, risk taker, networker, thankful, organized, extrovert, problem solver.

Darren provided a synopsis of him and his fellow POWs who have been part of a study regarding the long-term effects of the kind of experience they went through. The personality traits of ex-POWs doing well and those who are not fairing as well were compared. He shared the preliminary findings of the study by pointing to four characteristics of personality that the

Navy has found to be contributing factors to the well-being of ex-POW. The individuals are:

Basically optimistic, Spiritually grounded, Gregarious, Problem solvers.

“I am inclined to think that God built into us, the vast majority of us, to do incredible things. We just don’t ever picture ourselves that way. When people say to me, ‘I could never have done that.’ I say, yeah you could have done it. Most likely you would have done just fine. Most of us (POWs) understood our situation. We had realistic optimism. It’s going to get better or we can make something out of it. Spiritually grounded. We had faith, we had a faith that grounded us. We were gregarious. We weren’t loners. We are problem solvers. I look around at my friends who were in Hanoi with me. They fit that mold. They are all optimistic, realistically optimistic. None of them are loners. They all had faith that served them during that time.”

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

6.1 Altruism

Although the exploratory nature and qualitative research methods of this study were not designed with the objective of generalization, there are indications that the results of the study may be applicable for a wider population of trauma survivors. Some of the emerging themes were supported by published research. As discussed in the literature review, findings from existing posttraumatic growth (PTG) research revealed the following areas of posttraumatic growth: spiritual change, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and personal strength (Morris, Finch, Rieck, & Newbery, 2005; Erbes et al., 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The findings of this study both validate the existing PTG literature and introduce new avenues for exploration. Spiritual strength, new possibilities, relating to others, and personal strength are research findings in common with PTG literature. Congruent with posttraumatic growth literature, participants either expressed gaining strength or being told that they are perceived as strong, as well as some attributing their gained strength from God. In fact, some of the participants expressed that the trauma allowed them to find strength they never knew they had until being tested.

“Anybody that says anything to me, it’s just that, how strong I am and being able to do this and to get through it...Most of them were, I wish I was as strong as you. But you don’t know how strong you are until you go through that. Because I never would have thought that I could have done it.”

However, appreciation of life was not expressed by those who lost a child. Relating to others was discussed in relation to their increased empathy and concern for others, but a few of the participants have experienced negative consequences with personal relationships due to their

focused pursuits. An interesting addition, as found in this study, the validation and encouragement from strangers appears to promote posttraumatic growth. Each participant could recount and quote one of the first comments they received from strangers that have “stuck with them” in a meaningful way.

“And I’ll never forget this one man. I wish he knew the impact he had on me.

Do you realize how much that empowered me?”

This is an interesting phenomenon that should be explored for its potential positive impact in trauma studies.

The PTG literature also states that ongoing distress is often present with posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Based on the findings of this research, growth and distress may have a complex relationship. The manifestation of growth may also contain distress to the degree to which growth is tied to the hope and efforts to create positive outcomes for others. This was demonstrated by those participants who expressed how difficult it was to recount their tragedy to strangers in the hopes of helping them; and when an individual validated that their efforts were meaningful, the participant felt a sense of personal accomplishment. This dichotomy echoes the speculation of continued struggle and growth. It is difficult to clearly delineate or separate motivating themes from participants’ dialogue. As discussed earlier, it is possible for an individual to have simultaneous motivations and extracting one without the other does not accurately portray the underlying principle.

The study’s findings also parallel earlier studies that the type of trauma is not necessarily a predictor of posttraumatic growth. The current study does not demarcate differences in posttraumatic growth and the creation of positive outcomes for others as a result of the type of trauma. However, the individuals who lost a child appear to experience more symptoms of exhaustion than those who experienced trauma to themselves. This assessment

was evaluated by their affect, body language and number of verbal accounts of exhaustion and struggles with anxiety.

This study's examination of self-described personality traits, not evaluated in other posttraumatic growth studies, contributes to the knowledge of personality types that may shed light on the research question related to why some individuals go on to create positive macro-level outcomes. The personality characteristics of the participants appear at face value to equip the individuals to take on the challenge. The ways in which individuals perceive posttraumatic growth or attempt to help others from their own tragedies may vary for a number of reasons. Perhaps the proclivity to take control and attempt to prevent others from a similar demise is affected by their personality traits, as well as previously faith-based beliefs. Most participants described themselves as optimistic. Both optimism (Mendola, Tennen, Affleck, McCann & Fitzgerald, 1990) and positive reinterpretation coping have been found to predict the amount of posttraumatic growth individuals report (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996).

The lack of research into altruistic behavior post-trauma does not allow for comparison of the results and consequences for individuals helping others after experiencing trauma. However, the potential of altruistic behaviors to contribute to healing has been recognized by the helping professions and utilized in therapeutic intervention programs (Mollica, 2004; Kishon-Barash et al., 1999) as well as non-profit organizations such as The Mission Continues. This non-profit organization, founded by wounded soldiers, recognizes the importance of helping wounded soldiers by funding them to help others. Altruistic behavior is often witnessed in the aftermath of a natural disaster where those equally affected turn to help others.

Tedeschi identified compassion and altruism as likely aspects of posttraumatic growth: "When people recognize their own vulnerability, they may be better able to feel compassion and that some trauma may be a kind of empathy training. Out of this ...may come a need to help...This is likely to occur after certain time has passed (1998, p. 12)." The surprising finding that seven

of the nine participants began helping others within one year (four within three months) of their traumas surpasses what has been speculated by researchers who have touched upon the potential phenomenon of altruism after trauma. All three participants who were originally asked to share their stories and those who initiated their endeavors have continued their work of helping others. The least amount of time individuals had been helping others post-trauma was three years when interviewed. None have discontinued their work. Although some expressed “stopping or slowing down” at some point, they did not know when. Some also expressed feelings of guilt at the thought of ending their work. Two participants have begun to delegate responsibilities in an effort to balance their lives and allow others to contribute more. However, some of the work by these individuals is not easily delegated as the sharing of their stories is paramount to the effectiveness of their programs. Altruism is the unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Based on the definition, not all helping behavior is altruistic. Only selfless helping is considered altruism. Although one participant said it did not start out as “a great altruistic reason,” and others may have hoped it would be healing, it is clear that the end result has been altruism by its definition. They clearly demonstrate self-sacrifice, often to exhaustion.

6.2 Posttraumatic Social Action

If posttraumatic growth theory and literature is in its early years, the exploration and theory development of posttraumatic social action (PTSA) is in its conception. As discussed earlier, the pinnacle of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is self-actualization and posttraumatic growth theory is also discussed in terms of personal growth and fulfillment. Posttraumatic social action describes a level of growth and accomplishment within the individual and in expression of altruism in action. This study utilized grounded theory, qualitative data that was coded to identify categories. Grounded theory, building theory out of qualitative data is used to generate theory as opposed to other research methods used to verify existing theory. Because of the lack of

theory explaining posttraumatic social action, grounded theory development was the logical approach. The development of theory that may help explain the cognitive, affective and behavioral motivations and consequences of individuals who help others on a macro-level after experiencing trauma is central to exploration and understanding. The term “posttraumatic social action” is being used in theorizing why some individuals create social action that benefits others and the personal consequences of their actions. Posttraumatic social action stems from the need to help others that arises after experiencing trauma and the subsequent positive action taken in relation to a particular trauma. As mentioned, no consistency was found in the type of trauma that evoked feelings of social action. However, some emotional and relational differences were found in individuals who lost a child as opposed to those who experienced trauma to themselves. The differences can be divided into trauma to the person and trauma due to loss in future studies. Categories of personal growth that were consistent were (1) feelings of personal strength, (2) spiritual strength, (3) feeling the need to help others and (4) taking healing into their own hands by demonstrating social action. Motivations can be subdivided into two areas: Trauma due to loss and trauma to oneself. Trauma due to loss includes the (1) need to help others, (2) desire to keep their loved one’s memory alive and (3) desire to ensure that their loss was not in vain. Trauma to oneself includes the desire to help others who experienced a similar scenario and the desire to prevent others from experiencing the same tragedy. Motivations that were not delineated by type of trauma were spiritual motivations and attempts to progress healing. A premier question in continued theory development in this area should be whether these actions foster cognitive, emotional and relational benefits for the individual engaging in these efforts, result in harm or obstruction in personal progress or are a complex combination of both. Longitudinal studies following individuals who initiated social action and those new to the process would be instrumental in helping explore the benefits or harms of such undertakings. The benefits are numerous in

regard to society, and a number of organizations implemented by such individuals reveal a significant contribution to American culture. Mothers Against Drunk Drivers is one of the most well-known organizations created as a result of trauma experienced by the founder. Many such organizations, both well known and obscure, contribute to helping varying populations of people. Many laws have been implemented as a result of individuals who experienced a tragedy as well. The Amber Hagerman Child Protection Act was signed and the more familiar Amber Alert, which immediately notifies the public after the abduction of a child in their area, has resulted in saving the lives of 554 children according to the United States Department of Justice (2012). This study explored the efforts of individuals who have reached many through their efforts. Should future studies reveal a pattern of benefits from such behavior, the advantages to helping individuals consider posttraumatic social action as a possibility on their journey to healing may have widespread positive outcomes. As discussed in an earlier section, many organizations are dependent on the individual's efforts and the recounting of their stories. In regard to the sustainability of their organizations or programs, perhaps they could benefit from sustainability development advisement. This type of training and organizational development might contribute to alleviating their feelings of guilt over ending their efforts while ensuring the continuance of their visions. An analysis of non-profit organizations may reveal origins similarly rooted in suffering. Future studies should also examine whether the phenomenon of posttraumatic social action is demonstrated on a micro-level as well. For example, how many individuals reach out to help others without formally creating a program or organization? Do some individuals assess whether their social action is no longer healthy for their continued growth and discontinue? Some participants discussed discontinuing at some point in the future. How and why do some individuals discontinue their proactive efforts? Another question that warrants exploration is whether previous trauma influences personal decisions such as the career choices of people, religious pursuits and volunteerism? Perhaps

this phenomenon is more common than social science has recognized or methodically explored. Future research into posttraumatic social action may explore these questions and continue to expand on findings that reflect benefits, harms, motivations and personality traits of those who choose to engage in social action.

6.3 Limitations

This exploratory study was based on a small sample size with limited ethnic and racial diversity. Additionally, the data collected through in-depth interviews relied on the self-reported accounts of individuals who have experienced trauma. It is not uncommon for persons who have experienced trauma to minimize their experiences as a way of coping (Enoch & Buchbinder, 2005). Finally, the possibility of participants focusing on positive outcomes could skew their recollections. However, they were questioned regarding harms in order to encourage them to explore all outcomes.

6.4 Implications

The social work profession is deeply rooted in pursuing the betterment of individuals, groups and society. The efforts of these individuals to help others on a macro-level also reflect the social work profession's commitment. Preparing social work students to become more informed to work with trauma survivors is essential. First, the number of individuals who experience trauma in their lifetime is vast, and the likelihood that social workers will assist individuals with issues that have origins in trauma is great. Secondly, understanding that a growing body of literature shows that there are potential positive growth aspects post-trauma is important in helping those individuals identify and gain strength. Thirdly, this study has discussed the potential powerful allies that individuals who are working toward similar goals as social workers can have in implementing positive change. Educating social work students to be better informed regarding trauma survivors has significant benefits for individuals and society. Practice classes could be revamped to not simply present problems but help the students

examine where the problem may have originated. Implementing trauma-informed practices may help the students identify why the presenting problem may not be as simple as it appears. Trauma-informed practitioners would be equipped to view people in terms of their characteristics, histories, and potential for growth.

In regard to practice, the awareness that transformative growth is possible, without making it a standard that people need to live up to, is important when working with this population. Also, in light of the short amount of time the participants began working to help others, this time sequence should not be a measure or an expectation placed upon individuals post-trauma. The recognition of growth, as described by participants, is not a conceptual realization but rather experiential, described in terms of helping others. This connection with feeling the benefits of helping others is complexly intertwined with their personal growth.

Of those who mentioned speaking with a therapist, they mentioned that the practitioner was most helpful when validating their efforts or encouraging them, as was also evident when they said that strangers who validated their efforts were important to them. Telling their stories was expressed as "healing." This is an important factor for clinicians to recognize, that telling of their stories is viewed as positive and may need to occur many times without pushing to reframe their experiences.

A question that might legitimately be raised regarding the findings of this study is "To what extent are the participants' responses to trauma usual or unusual?" In one sense the answer to this question is unknown, in that the participants were not asked to reflect on whether their positive responses to trauma were usual or unusual for them. However, many participants described themselves as inherently optimistic. Almost all participants expressed that they believed they had grown and become stronger because of what had happened to them. In an effort to help an individual explore and identify positive growth-like qualities and outcomes, it is vital that the negative implications of their trauma not be discounted. It is important to recognize

that people who champion causes to help others appear to have recovered but may be experiencing permanent pain and should be given the ability to express their hurt without expecting them to resolve with positive statements or actions. The narratives of the participants of this study demonstrate that recovery ought to be seen in terms of years rather than in terms of months, as is often American society's expectation. It is important to recognize that the participants were interviewed from three years to 42 years post-trauma, and the time for positive growth varies. Their recovery continues and as with others who experience trauma, cannot be pigeon-holed into a swift time frame. As with artists who create beautiful mosaics from broken pieces, these individuals too have picked up the broken pieces of their lives and had the strength and foresight to place them where others could benefit.

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