



Positive change processes and post-traumatic growth in people who have experienced childhood abuse: Understanding vehicles of change

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Post-traumatic growth is an emerging area of research concerned with the positive psychological changes that can follow the experience of traumatic events. The aim of this study is to explore themes of post-traumatic growth within personal experience narratives of individuals who have experienced some form of early emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Using thematic analysis, we identified three domains of themes related to positive change processes: inner drive toward growth, vehicles of change, and psychological changes. Understanding the different vehicles of change has implications for facilitating post-traumatic growth in clients who have experienced traumatic events.

Psychologists are increasingly adopting a positive psychological perspective to inform their research and practice (see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The salutary perspective is particularly evident in the growing body of evidence testifying to positive psychological changes that can result from traumatic experiences (Linley & Joseph, 2003).

According to O'Leary and Ickovics (1995), there are three possible outcomes: survival, recovery, or thriving. Those who merely survive never regain their previous level of functioning. Those who recover return to their previous level of functioning. Those who thrive, however, move beyond the original level of psychosocial functioning, flourish, and grow as a result of their experience. Post-traumatic growth

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experiences are therefore not just about learning to live with the effects of trauma, or about bouncing back from trauma, but are likened instead to a springboard to further individual development, thriving, and personal growth (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998).

Evidence shows that 40–70% of people who experience a traumatic event later report some form of benefit from their experience (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Three main areas of growth have been identified: changes in perception of self, changes in relationships with others, and changes in philosophy of life (see Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999).

Although various theoretical models have been proposed to explain the development of growth, it remains uncertain why some individuals grow in the aftermath of trauma, and others do not (O'Leary, Alday, & Ickovics, 1998). Drawing on the existing stress and trauma literature, personal characteristics such as self-confidence, locus of control, and dispositional optimism have been suggested as factors which might moderate or mediate the relationship between traumatic experience and post-traumatic growth (Tennen & Affleck, 1998). Although such personality factors are likely to play a role in the development of post-traumatic growth, it has been argued that simply adopting explanatory concepts that have worked well in other contexts might lead us to only a partial understanding of post-traumatic growth. For this reason, Saakvitne, Tennen, and Affleck (1998) argue that researchers should be cautious not to bypass descriptive inquiry in seeking to understand how post-traumatic growth comes about, and that there is a need for more idiographic research into the process of growth and change. Others have discussed the use of a qualitative approach to the investigation of post-traumatic growth as a means for understanding how respondents make sense of their lives (Massey, Cameron, Ouellette, & Fine, 1998).

The aim of this study was to adopt an idiographic approach that allowed us to explore what themes of post-traumatic growth arose within personal experience narratives. We were interested in understanding the phenomenology of growth and the processes through which post-traumatic growth takes place from the perspective of the respondent.

We would argue that personal growth can occur following the range of accidents, illnesses, and other threatening events. Post-traumatic growth experiences have been reported following stressful events (Thompson, 1985), disaster (Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1993), bereavement (Collins, Taylor, & Skokan, 1990), breast cancer (Weiss, 2002), and rape and sexual abuse (Burt & Katz, 1987; McMillen, Zuravin, & Rideout, 1995), to name but a few of the studies which have now been conducted in this area (see, Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). However, we would argue that what seems to be important is not the event itself, but rather what the person brings to their experiences, and how they appraise events. In the present study, we investigated growth processes in people who have experienced childhood abuse.

Method

Procedure

Data were collected through an advert placed in the newsletter of the National Organization for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC), asking for people to write in with their story of how their lives had changed. The advert asked for people to share with us their personal story about those turning points that the person had experienced and which had made a difference in terms of how they felt about themselves. The letter read as follows:

Help wanted for a study looking at how we make
sense of traumatic experiences

Abusive and traumatic experiences can have a fundamental and distressing impact upon our lives. Furthermore, it can be very hard to make sense of what has happened and how we feel about ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. For some, the impact of trauma can be too great and leaves the individual unable to cope and move on in their lives, while for others, positive change and personal growth may occur through the process of surviving and coping with traumatic experiences. Of course, one could also be left with some areas of one's life going well, while other aspects may not be so good. Whatever your experiences, I would like to hear from you. I am particularly interested to hear about any *key turning points* (or changes) in your life, which you think have made a difference in terms of how you feel about yourself and the trauma experienced. The purpose of telling your story is to highlight the variety of experiences that can come from trauma and the many ways that people find to make sense of their experiences. *If you would like to share your story* or find out more about this study, I would be very pleased to hear from you. Please write to me at the following address. . . . To protect anonymity, all names and personal identifiers will be removed.

Participants were informed that this was a research project and assured of anonymity and that all personal identifiers would be removed when the report was written. The proposal for research was scrutinized by the university department's ethics committee. The choice for eliciting written responses as a method of data collection was to ensure that respondents were able to tell their stories in their own way and to ensure that they had full control over what they wrote about and included in their letter (see, Woodward, 2000).

Upon hearing about the advert, respondents either wrote in with their 'story' or requested further information about the study. All respondents received a personal reply, an information sheet about the study, and a brief background demographic sheet. The advert elicited 17 personal experience narratives. A further 12 respondents were recruited through 'word of mouth' and snowball sampling. The personal experience narratives received took the form of a letter, which averaged seven pages (ranging from one to 37 pages). Fourteen letters were handwritten and 15 typed. Additional information received from respondents included poems, previously written documents, extracts

from books and diaries, and newspaper cuttings. Personal experience narratives are stories that people tell about their personal or 'lived experiences'.

Participants

A total of 29 respondents were included within this study, five of whom were male and 24 female, aged between 22 and 72 years ($M = 39$, $SD = 11$). Thirteen of the respondents were married or living with a partner, 10 were divorced or separated, and six described themselves as single. Respondents came from a variety of occupational backgrounds. All respondents had experienced childhood trauma, which took various forms but mostly involved sexual, physical, and emotional abuse or neglect. In the majority of cases, the abuse began from a young age and was of a long-standing duration. Perpetrators were mostly male family members but also included mothers and male adults outside the family.

Narrative content

Although the study is concerned with those who have experienced childhood abuse, our focus was not on the abuse per se but on how respondents had made sense of their experiences. We did not ask respondents to provide detail of their childhood experiences but about whatever experiences the person thought had constituted turning points in their lives.

Narratives were therefore not necessarily focused on childhood experiences, and the detail that respondents provided on their childhood experiences varied considerably. Indeed, four respondents did not write about experiences of childhood abuse within their narratives, although all four disclosed to the first author in their covering letter that they had experienced childhood abuse. Narratives were mostly concerned with experiences since childhood and those experiences that had served as turning points in some way.

Thematic analysis

In considering how best to analyze the narratives, the following criteria were of importance: (1) that themes could be captured which had emerged directly from the raw data; (2) that a systematic method would be used whereby themes could be clearly identified; and (3) the analysis process could be checked for reliability. Thematic analysis, as described by Boyatzis (1998), was employed in analysing the data.

Conceptually, thematic analysis can be seen as part of the interpretive phenomenological approach (see Moustakis, 1994; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; van Manen, 1990) in that the emphasis is on participants' own views of the phenomena under investigation. Interpretative phenomenological analytic techniques are increasingly being used in the field of psychology in a bid to understand the participant's personal view of the phenomena under investigation.

Authors' experience and values

The challenge of thematic analysis is for the researchers not to impose their own values or assumptions onto the data. Nevertheless, the method also acknowledges that the

researcher impacts on the research process by way of having to make sense of, and interpret, the participant's personal world, and that as researchers, it is impossible to set aside one's own perspective totally (see Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). For that reason, it is important that readers have some understanding of our experience, values, and assumptions as we entered into this line of enquiry.

The lead author, Clare Woodward, completed the investigation as part of her doctoral training in clinical psychology under the supervision of the second author. Prior to this, Clare Woodward had previously completed a Ph.D. using qualitative methods to analyse personal experience narratives of abuse survivors (Woodward, 1999). This previous work was with a different data set to that used here and was not concerned with personal growth per se, although the analysis did provide some tentative evidence for personal growth in survivors of abuse (Woodward & Fortune, 1999). At the time of the investigation, she was serving as the chair of NAPAC with a commitment to supporting people with a history of abuse and providing a space for their voices to be heard. Hers was a feminist, epistemological perspective with an emphasis on emancipatory research which informed the choice of asking participants to write their stories, as it allowed them to tell us their story in their own way (Woodward, 2000).

Therapeutically, both authors have an interest in the value of storytelling. Stephen Joseph has research interest in the effects of traumatic events and in particular in how trauma can lead to positive changes. He has been a researcher in the field of traumatic research for the past 15 years. He also has interests in the person-centred approach to therapy.

Both authors consulted regularly over the 12-month period during which the study was planned and conducted. Both authors acknowledged at the beginning of the study that personal growth was sometimes reported by people with a history of abuse and that it was appropriate to ask participants to write to us about their turning-point experiences. However, we did not assume what those turning points would be.

Analysis trail

The process of analysis involved five steps with the aim of identifying a robust coding frame, which could be continually checked against the narratives, as well as given to an independent rater to provide a check as to the reliability of the authors' work and to minimize bias.

Step 1

Step 1 involved Clare Woodward producing an outline summary of each narrative's content. The process of doing this had several benefits. First, by working on the data, it provided a better understanding of each narrative. Second, it helped to reduce the quantity of data, thereby making it more manageable but without losing the essence

or meaning of the narrative. Third, initial identification of themes, topics, and patterns began to emerge. Outline summaries for eight of the narratives were also independently produced by Stephen Joseph. The first reliability check on the analytic process involved the two authors selecting this sample of eight narrative outlines and checking each other's independently produced summaries and emerging themes against the narratives themselves in order to see whether the 'story' had been accurately captured. Both authors were in close agreement at this stage, allowing us to proceed to stage 2.

Step 2

Step 2 involved Clare Woodward making a list of all of the emerging themes. Through discussion between the two authors, themes were reviewed, and then those that fitted together were clustered into new themes and grouped together.

Steps 3 and 4

At step 3, Clare Woodward developed a coding label that was then applied to each new theme, along with a description of the themes' contents. The authors reviewed this process at step 4, and themes were reworked to provide clear and distinct codes. At this point, three domains (heuristic organizing categories) were identified by the authors. These domains provided headings, which the authors felt best illustrated the essence of the themes.

Step 5

Step 5 involved checking the themes with the original narratives and provided a further reliability check on the analytic process. This was in order to define further the themes including identifying, where appropriate, identifiers (i.e. when the theme is to be coded) and exclusions (i.e. what is excluded from the theme). At this step, we also began to identify quotes to illustrate the themes, and to see which themes could be found within each narrative (differentiation), allowed the themes to be compared and contrasted. This iterative process (continuously switching between themes and the original narratives) ensured that any missing themes could be clearly identified.

Finally, the codes were checked against 10 randomly chosen narratives by an independent rater who had not had any previous involvement in the study. The independent rater was a psychologist with a Ph.D. He agreed that the thematic summaries were warranted from the narratives. Finally, the journal review process and suggestions of the reviewers led to further discussion and a slight change in terminology for some of the themes and dissolution of a pre-existing theme into the other themes.

Although we were not offering any clinical service to participants, all letters were replied to by Clare Woodward thanking participants. In addition, copies of the thesis manuscript were sent to all of the participants, along with a letter requesting any

feedback on the content or any concerns over how we had presented their stories. Comments received on the manuscript were positive, and no concerns were raised about how we had presented the stories. Indeed, we were encouraged by the comments of several respondents that our work was valued. One of the participants, Cathy, wrote to us, saying, 'I feel enthusiastic about the positive approach you are taking, of focusing on what have been the creative driving forces, for making sense of what has happened and for change'.

Results

Analysis of the personal experience narratives revealed a pattern of salient themes. As each individual narrative is completely unique in terms of the experiences described, themes differed across the narratives. While the narratives draw upon past and present experiences, as well as hopes for the future, they represent individual 'moments of being' and by no means capture the whole picture of individual lives. What is significant about the narratives is that they capture important aspects within the person's life, which they believe has led them to their present position and to a place where they can write about, and reflect upon, their traumatic experiences. From the analysis, 10 themes emerged, which, after being reviewed and discussed by both authors, were grouped under three broad domains (see Table 1). This was a similar grouping process to that used by Macran, Stiles, and Smith (1999). We were interested in how the themes could be meaningfully grouped into broader domains, and we sought organizing principles that would allow us to understand and efficiently communicate how participants had changed positively. The process therefore was largely an inductive, or bottom-up, approach—starting with the narratives and moving toward concepts that organized and integrated what we observed.

While it cannot be stated that the domains and themes are totally orthogonal, thematic analysis can allow subtle differences between the themes to be captured, through the development of distinct and robust codes. The domains and themes will be considered in turn with verbatim quotes added to illustrate each one. Ellipses (. . .) indicate omitted material. Respondents' names and other identifying details have all been changed to protect anonymity.

We identified three domains, which we called inner drive, vehicles of change, and psychological changes. The domains represented a distinction between what seemed to us to reflect: first of all, factors internal to the person; second, psychological processes that were triggered by person–environment interactions; and third, descriptions of psychological changes.

Inner drive toward growth

Several respondents noted how they had a belief, or faith in themselves, that somehow they would survive their experience.

Table I. Salient themes grouped into domains

Domain and themes	No. of respondents with theme
Inner drive toward growth	
(1) Will to live	9
Vehicles of change	
(2) Awakening of responsibility	18
(3) Validation and acceptance	13
(4) Love and nurturing	16
(5) Liberation and freedom	10
(6) Mastery and control	7
(7) Belonging and connection	8
Psychological changes	
(8) Changes in self-perception	24
(9) Gaining new perspectives on life	17
(10) Changes in relationships	6

Theme 1: Will to live

Nine of the respondents within their narratives referred to or indicated some form of 'inner drive', 'will to live', 'passion for living', 'fighting spirit', or 'determination' which they felt was instrumental in enabling them to survive, live, seek meaning in their experiences, and ultimately heal. For example, Jane wrote of a 'will to live' that was within her and which her abusers could not destroy:

I know however much I wanted to die I had a massive will to live. Why else would I be alive after being sexually abused in every way possible . . . why else could I be alive after being physically abused so often . . . there was a part of me that they could never touch. (Jane)

Similarly, Cathy who had made several suicide attempts came to recognize at her third attempt that she had what she called a 'passion for living':

The suicide attempt was the third turning point, as once I had taken the pills and knew that if I did nothing I would die, I recognized in me that I have a huge passion for living and that I did not want to die. (Cathy)

Frances also talked about how, although at times she too would prefer to die, there was within her something that kept her from taking her own life:

There were many times in the last 8 years that I felt life was too hard, and I would prefer to be wherever my sister had gone, but something always kept me from going over the edge . . . (Frances)

Vehicles of change

This domain is concerned with experiences of an awakening, validating, nurturing, liberating and mastery nature identified by respondents as being important in terms of bringing about or influencing areas of positive change and personal growth. Also included are experiences, which bring about a sense of belonging or connection to others, including those of a religious and/or spiritual nature.

Theme 2: Awakening of responsibility

In reflecting upon their experiences, over half of the respondents mentioned having come to a point in their lives when they realised that they had a choice to make over whether or not to take responsibility and control over the direction of their own lives. For Cathy, this came during her stay in a psychiatric hospital:

I . . . went to stay in a psychiatric home for four months. There I saw many women who were trapped in the medical system of heavy medication, shock treatment and episodes of schizophrenia and self-harming. I realised that I really wanted to be well and that I could not let myself be caught up in the psychiatric system . . . I understood that I had a choice not to go that way. (Cathy)

For Elaine, making the choice to take action came during her 40th year and on new years day:

When I was 40, one new years day, I woke and made a clear decision to deal with what I knew to be in the back of my mind. (Elaine)

Katie wrote about how she coped more actively with her illness after reading and learning about holistic medicine:

. . . from that moment on, I decided it was my own responsibility to heal my body and to take back control of my life. (Katie)

These three extracts illustrate this theme and how participants came to a point when they made a choice to take responsibility for their own directions in life.

Theme 3: Validation and acceptance

Just under half of the respondents highlighted how change had occurred through experiencing genuine acceptance from others, where they felt that they could be themselves. For Sarah, an important turning point was simply being asked about her experiences by someone:

For the first time, I asked for a lady doctor, and she asked me questions as a new patient. I talked about the abuse and the problems I was experiencing . . . no one had ever asked me before. (Sarah)

Grace, who went to see a counsellor, wrote:

. . . what I gained from this first experience of being seen and received which I'm not sure I'd ever had previously was an opportunity to begin knowing myself and the slow process of valuing myself. (Grace)

For Neil, it was his wife and children who made such a difference, first through their acceptance and then through their love:

I was scared, and I was alone. My ten-foot concrete walls of hurt made sure no one ever came close enough to making me bleed pain again. . . . I was able to say to a friend 'I was abused'. I expected to be rejected but I was not. . . . She accepted me and did not reject me. I was able to trust and love someone else, she is the keystone that had been missing in my life. This keystone is the one crucial stone. . . . (Neil)

What this theme recognizes is how the experience of being listened to and being seen by another person can be a powerful validation for those who have felt unheard and invisible. It is about being seen and heard for who you are and what you have experienced.

Theme 4: Love and nurturing

Over half of the respondents wrote about being able to give self-nurture and care in terms of recognizing, seeking, and meeting one's own needs (including safety needs), as well as being more receptive to receiving nurture and care from others. Many respondents wrote about receiving love and care from significant others. For Joanne, it was from a teacher at school:

My teacher was gifted and sensitive; she called me sunshine. She had the love and ability to see beneath the rebellious child. (Joanne)

Sarah talked about how her work with children, and the love she received from them helped her:

They loved me just as I was, and this wonderful experience melted some of the deadness in my heart. (Sarah)

Mary wrote about how having her own home had helped to nurture herself and to bring about change:

. . . Oh something else that has had a big impact is owning my own home. I bought my house about 18 months ago. It is a three-bed mid-terrace with three floors (four including the cellar) and a south-facing yard at the back which produced some great sunflowers this summer! Having a home has given me a great sense of stability and security. . . . In a way, I see it as a metaphor for my life. When I bought the property, it was very run down and neglected. Every room needed total renovation. . . . It's while I'm fixing up my house. I'm fixing up myself too. (Mary)

Theme 5: Liberation and freedom

Another important vehicle of change reported by a third of respondents was having a sense of liberation and freedom. Feeling a sense of freedom can come from several different sources, including perceiving a sense of control, telling a secret, forgiveness,

and gaining insight and awareness. Feeling free can also be exhibited in terms of behaviours, e.g. from walking hunched over to putting one's shoulders back and lifting one's head, as in the case of Mary, who felt totally different after confronting her abuser with what had happened to her as a child:

I let him know how angry I was. . . . It was a great shock, but it was incredible the difference it made . . . I had always walked hunched over, trying to hide and protect myself . . . now I began to push my shoulders back and lift my head. . . . (Mary)

Elizabeth described how she felt liberated after disclosing what had happened to her through writing a book:

For nearly 50 years, I kept the secret to myself. Fear of rejection, guilt, and an overwhelming sense of shame governed my life. . . . With the encouragement of my wonderful husband, I wrote a book. . . . The sense of peace and release that resulted from disclosing the past was overwhelming. At last, I was free. (Elizabeth)

For Lauren and Cathy, freedom came in the form of forgiveness. Cathy writes:

I felt so burdened by the hatred and drive for revenge . . . I gradually came to understand that if I really wanted to be free in my heart, I need to forgive my parents. . . . No other experience has been so life-changing for me. . . . (Cathy)

Theme 6: Mastery and control

Whilst some respondents such as Cathy wrote about the powerful impact that liberating experiences had, others wrote about how change came about through gaining a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Joanne wrote about how it was through her achievements at work that she could develop a sense of pride:

. . . I was presented to HRH Princess Margaret . . . and also to the Archbishop of Canterbury for my work with young people . . . I worked in run down, socially deprived areas and, by creative and innovative methods of working, brought culturally unacceptable juveniles to a better sense of themselves. (Joanne)

For Susan, it was getting top marks in her maths exam:

I went back to college to try to gain my GCSE in maths. . . . This to me is a form of fighting against my parents, my ex-husband, and plenty of others who have called me names over the years . . . I now feel like I can take on the world and win, and no amount of being put down or bullying is going to affect me any more! (Susan)

while for Frances, a sense of mastery was achieved through the prosecution of her abuser:

I felt that I had, at last, taken back the power that my abuser had stolen from me as a child, by naming him and telling the Police what he had done. . . . The physical act of prosecution and going to court has given me more strength. . . . I made myself look at him in court and although in tears at doing so, I was able to replace the old image of him with a new one. I am now growing in strength. . . . (Frances)

Theme 7: Belonging and connection

In eight of the narratives, respondents wrote about having a sense of belonging and connection. For example, Mary wrote about the importance of feeling understood by her partner.

... and finally feeling I had someone understand me. I would say one of the most awful things about sexual abuse and its after-effects is the sense of isolation which surrounds you. . . . (Mary)

For others, the connection was of a spiritual or mystical nature. Jack wrote about having a 'guardian angel':

... but protected by something . . . I have talked to other survivors, many of whom also talk of a guardian angel in their lives. (Jack)

Similarly, what appears important for Kate is her faith and connection with God:

I also recognize that His presence of the power of Life itself, in my spirit and soul, has had a substantially healing effect and enabled me to continue into the future, many times. (Kate)

Psychological changes

This domain relates to increased insight and understanding, recognition of changes, and the processing of experiences brought about by vehicles of change. Salient themes under this heading concern being more in touch with self, gaining new perspectives on life, and developing an increased sense of importance of relationships.

Theme 8: Changes in self-perception

This broad theme relates to increased self-awareness and covers all descriptions of positive change relating to self. It also includes being able to feel, express, and process feelings, the recognition of inner strengths, as well as recognition of further changes needed in one's life. As might be expected, this theme was clearly evident in virtually all the narratives. Kate likened herself to a Humpty Dumpty who had been put together again:

[After praying with two Christian friends] . . . I began to have a sense of personal identity that I couldn't really remember from my era in my past. I also felt that, unlike 'Humpty Dumpty', every part of me had been scooped up again and replaced into my real, whole shell and put back on the 'wall'. By this, I had deduced that I'd been smashed to the ground until then. (Kate)

Whereas Kate talked about how she was now more whole as a person, Grace talked about how her changes had been in terms of self-awareness and in being able to experience her feelings to a greater depth.

There are times when I wish I could return to a time of less self-awareness, a kind of blissful ignorance, but the gain perhaps of increased self-awareness is an increase in the

depth of feeling good/bad, happy/sad, etc. which I wouldn't now be without. (Grace)

For Cathy, it was acceptance of the different facets of herself that was important:

. . . I realized that my victim is a part of me, and the only way forward was to accept that fact and try to love this part of me . . . (Cathy)

Theme 9: Gaining new perspectives on life

Two-thirds of respondents also wrote about changes in their world view. For Karen, it was the recognition that change is inevitable, being able to accept the past, and being able to live in the present:

It has been a time of great contrasts—anguish and despair followed by real joy and confidence. I feel as if I have crossed a bridge and now on the other side, but still finding my feet . . . I know though that life is change, and one of the ways I have changed is a much greater sense of living in the present, being present now and accepting that everything changes and ultimately dies. (Karen)

Living in the present was also mentioned by Isobella, who described how she now views life as a positive learning process, and to be herself. However, she also adds that her biggest change is in her attitude to death:

I enjoy everyday to the full, I don't worry about silly things anymore, and if something is important to me, I make an effort to do or say something about it. I speak my mind and have no regrets about anything. . . . I realize now that however unjust or unfair Robert's death was that this is part of life. Sometimes, things that seem unfair have to happen, and although I'd rather he was alive, I have learnt a great deal from the experience. . . . The biggest thing I've gained from this is that I don't fear death. (Isobella)

Jackie talks about how she has come to understand that she has to allow her grown-up children to take responsibility for their own lives and that she had changed in her approach to life:

Perhaps it is a sign of my personal growth that I accept they must live their life as they choose. I am not responsible for them or their decisions. . . . I have developed a more philosophical and patient approach to life (Jackie)

Theme 10: Changes in relationships

Six respondents made direct reference to how their relationships had improved. For example:

I have learned to appreciate what I have, a loving husband and three children with whom I have a warm and affectionate relationship. (Jackie)

[The car accident] brought many positive changes in my relationships with those around me, because I had to learn to trust them to look after me, and had learnt how much they meant to me. . . . (Katie)

As well as learning to appreciate family and friends more, Emily talks of how she has become more assertive with other people and has begun to redefine her relationships in a more satisfactory way:

I chose to write to them explaining my unhappiness and a wish to cease contact until I had managed to think things through. . . . The therapeutic value was a sense of control and feeling independent. . . . (Emily)

Discussion

Given the uniqueness of the personal experience narratives, several salient themes emerged which we believe reflect the stories being told. Our aim throughout was to reflect as accurately as possible the contents of the narratives, and in doing so to document areas of positive change and personal growth. The analysis of the personal experience narratives revealed many examples of positive change and personal growth, as well as revealing how such changes may have come about for that person.

In terms of the psychological changes that people reported, our analysis is very much in line with previous work in documenting that there are changes related to the self, about philosophical approaches to life, and within relationships. We do not think we uncovered any changes here that have not already been noted in the literature (e.g. Joseph *et al.*, 1993; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

However, we found that the vehicles of change domain provide us with some novel themes that help us to understand positive change processes. What we have found is consistent with the empirical literature on the importance of control and coping variables, but what is interesting is how these accounts give us some understanding of these variables from the respondents' perspective. We noted that whereas much of the empirical literature on growth focuses on dispositional aspects of the person, our analyses point more toward the social context. Many of the participants talked of how it was through their relationships that they felt nurtured, liberated, or validated, for example.

A methodological issue common to this line of enquiry is whether the themes really emerged from the raw narratives of the participants, or whether they were already part of the folklore of trauma recovery, known to the participants from the popular literature, or through their own experiences of therapy. Certainly, some of the participants reported having experienced counselling or psychotherapy in the past, and such experiences must undoubtedly influence participants in how they come to understand and talk about their experiences. But we have no doubt that our participants were engaged seriously with us in telling us their stories as they experienced them.

As researchers, we recognize that it is impossible to set aside our own perspectives entirely. We are aware that our analysis is consistent with a client-centred viewpoint in pointing towards an inner drive towards growth. This was a preconception, but this domain is well grounded in examples, and we think that our results do adequately represent the experiences of our participants. Some form of inner drive or fighting spirit

was clearly evident in some accounts, but we would caution that not all of our participants talked of an inner drive, and it would be going beyond our data to claim that we had evidence here for a universal phenomenon underlying growth. This is an interesting question, however, for future research.

The domain of vehicles of change emerged from our analysis and captured something that neither of us had any preconceived idea about. The idea is that life experiences of almost any kind can come to be perceived as a vehicle of change—to liberate the person, to allow them a sense of mastery, to nurture, to validate, or to provide connection—and that it is through these processes that people come to develop and to grow. Participants talked about how a variety of events had served as vehicles of change; the death of a significant other, going to counselling, reading something, buying a house, kind words from a teacher, the love of children, and so on. Any life experience at all can serve as a vehicle of change. It does not seem to us to be particularly important what events *per se* were associated with change. Rather, it seems more important to recognize that participants had needs for validation, for liberation, for nurturance, for belonging, for mastery, and for awakening, and our participants had been able to make use of their life experiences to meet these needs.

We would emphasize, therefore, that although life events serve as vehicles of change, the event itself is relatively unimportant. Rather, it is the person's appraisal of that event. For example, one of our participants, Frances told us of how she had gained mastery and control through going ahead with the prosecution of her abuser. For Frances, this experience had proved beneficial, but we would not want anyone to assume from our analysis that going through the process of prosecution is intrinsically psychologically beneficial. For someone else, the process of prosecution could be highly distressing and lead to further traumatization.

The present research has implications for psychological therapists. First of all, it is important to recognize that childhood abuse does not necessarily lead to a damaged life and that, for some, traumatic experiences can lead to positive change and growth. Second, there is the recognition that although, for some, positive change came about through the encounter with a therapist, most of the letters demonstrated the role of extra-therapeutic factors in helping participants see that change was possible and in maintaining those changes. Third, and following on from understanding the role of extra-therapeutic factors, it is important that we, as therapists, are able to work to enhance the effect of extra-therapeutic factors and to facilitate our clients' ability to 'find their own vehicles of change'. Fourth, the fact that childhood abuse does not necessarily lead to a damaged life and can lead to positive change is not true for everyone, and therapists need to be careful not to inadvertently imply that the person has in some way failed in not making more of their experience. Therapeutically, in recognizing the possibility of growth and in talking about it with our clients, we must be cautious not to imply that there is anything inherently positive about their traumatic experiences. We would agree with Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998), who suggest that, in discussing growth

with clients ' . . . it is important to use words that clearly locate the impetus for growth in the arena of struggle with the event, not the event itself ' (p. 366). Personal growth after trauma should be viewed as originating not from the event but from within the person themselves.

In conclusion, although we think we have identified some important themes that help us to understand the nature of positive change processes, we would caution that our set of narratives can capture only a snapshot of respondents' lives along with the reflections that respondents made at the time of writing. Furthermore, our respondents were self-selected, and we cannot say to what extent our findings would generalize. We have no reason to believe that the processes we have identified here do not generalize to other groups, but further qualitative work is necessary to confirm whether similar themes are present in the narratives of other populations. Finally, our results draw attention to the varieties of extra-therapeutic social and environmental contexts that those individuals who have experienced trauma are able to use to bring about their own change and point us toward some important therapeutic principles.

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