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Carolyn M. Aldwin

This study contributes to our understanding of positive adult development by examining resilience processes in adulthood. Resilience is often considered to be an individual-level trait. However, the child development literature has consistently shown that support from parents and caring others is a critical component of resilience. Less is known about how adults navigate and negotiate their social environments following adversity in ways that promote adjustment and growth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with men \(n = 14\) and women \(n = 36\), ages 56 - 91 years \(M = 71.71; SD = 8.8\) who described a challenging life event and subsequent thoughts and actions. Retrospective accounts included events from childhood, early adulthood, midlife, and later life. Constructivist grounded theory informed the analysis. Results suggested that patterns of disruption to a person’s sense of global meaning were related to social transactions, some of which supported adjustment (recovery), and others that facilitated growth through finding meaning that included introspection, self-knowledge, and compassion. The importance of a person’s transactional relationship with their social environments in the development of wisdom is discussed.
Resilience in Adulthood: How Does the Social Environment Facilitate Adjustment and Growth Following Adversity?

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Heidi Igarashi

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Human Development and Family Studies

Co–Director of the School of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Heidi Igarashi, Author
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Page**

## Introduction

Meaning and the Process of Resilience ................................................................. 1
Outcomes of Positive Adult Development ............................................................... 3
Present Study ............................................................................................................ 5

## Literature Review

Resilience .................................................................................................................. 7
Outcomes of the Resilience Process ......................................................................... 8
Processes of Resilience: An Overview ..................................................................... 18
Utilizing the Social Environment in the Process of Resilience ............................... 29
Present Study ............................................................................................................ 36

## Method

Sample ...................................................................................................................... 38
Procedures ................................................................................................................ 39
Analytic Approach .................................................................................................... 40
Table 1. Sample Characteristics .............................................................................. 44
Table 2. Respondent Pseudonyms and Characteristics ............................................ 45

## Results

Context ....................................................................................................................... 47
Resilience Processes and the Social Environment ....................................................... 56
Finding Meaning Through the Social Environment ................................................... 67
Resilience Outcomes of Adjustment and Growth ....................................................... 77
Table 3. Summary of Events, Meaning, and Growth Categories ............................... 88
Table 4. Meaning Disruption by Outcomes of Adjustment and Growth .................... 89

## Discussion

Summary of Findings ................................................................................................. 90
Conclusions ............................................................................................................... 96
Limitations ................................................................................................................ 97
Future Directions ..................................................................................................... 99

## References

................................................................................................................................. 101

## Appendices

Appendix A. Life Experience Questionnaire ............................................................. 120
Appendix B. Interview Questions ............................................................................. 139
Appendix C. Sample of Initial Coding .................................................................... 140
Appendix D. Sample of Memo Writing .................................................................... 142
Appendix E. Sample of Focused Coding Worksheet .................................................. 144
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sample Characteristics………………………………………………………….44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Respondent Pseudonyms and Characteristics………………………………..45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Summary of Events, Meaning, and Growth Categories……………………….88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Meaning Disruption by Outcomes of Adjustment and Growth………………..89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resilience in Adulthood: How Does the Social Environment Facilitate Adjustment and Growth Following Adversity?

Introduction

Our imaginations are captivated by stories about individuals overcoming adversity. We marvel at the fable of the infant Mowgli being raised by wolves in Kipling’s *Jungle Book* (1894) as readily as we do at Frankl’s (1959) survival of Auschwitz, or the accounts of survivors of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. The Syrian refugee crisis is but one among many current situations of people facing enormous difficulties. Fewer people experience such extraordinary adversities but most will face life challenges such as illness, injury, or bereavement. Recovery was once treated as if it were rare; however, even Darwin (1872) described human resilience as a biological imperative. While most bounce back from adversity, some also experience positive changes (Joseph & Hefferon, 2013; Masten & Reed, 2002), although transformative growth from such experiences is not guaranteed. The question of why, following difficulties, some rebound and remain relatively unscathed, some never recover, while others experience transformative growth has a long and rich history (Ryff, 2014; Werner & Smith, 2001). Yet our understanding of what predicts growth remains incomplete (Joseph & Hefferon, 2013).

Across a lifetime, unexpected and unwanted challenges can occur. Resilience involves a dynamic process that leads to positive adaptation within the context of such adversities (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). This study hopes to add to our understanding about what contributes to positive development in later life by exploring various pathways of resilience processes, and how these pathways are linked to outcomes of adjustment and growth. In particular, greater knowledge about process-oriented predictors of growth could improve the chances of positive outcomes following a significant life challenge.
How a person makes sense of life when fundamental assumptions are disrupted is central to prominent theories of growth following adversity (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2004; Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These cognitive perspectives theorize that distress (e.g., anxiety and depression) is experienced when there are discrepancies between a person’s pre-trauma worldview and the meaning attributed to the stressful event (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2004; Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These discrepancies can involve self-concept and goals as well as beliefs about justice and a predictable world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, Mills, & Edmondson, 2012). From this theoretical viewpoint, it is not necessarily the event alone that is distressful but the extent of discordance between how one appraises the event through their meaning framework that involves their global assumptions (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Park & Folkman, 1997). However, relatively little work has been done to explicitly study the connections between a person’s prior worldview, the situational meaning of the difficult event, efforts at resolving discrepancies between the two, and the post-event worldview (cf Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; Park et al., 2012).

**Meaning and the Processes of Resilience**

The search for meaning in life is a normative, developmental process (Bruner, 1990; Wong, 2012) that influences well-being. Meaning in life is the “extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives” (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009, p. 43). In a study of adults across the life span, the presence of meaning was correlated with well-being, whereas those who were searching for meaning reported lower levels of well-being (Steger et al., 2009).

Meaning in life is related to a person’s global perspective that includes beliefs about the world, personal goals, and subjective feelings (Reker & Wong, 1988). Meaning is
conceptualized by various constructs such as life schemes (Thompson & Janigian, 1991), global meaning (Park, 2010), and assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Parkes, 1971). Global meaning is a personalized framework of schemas and assumptions about how a person sees one’s self and their world. It is thought to form early in life and be modified based on personal experiences and cultural and family values (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bruner, 1990). Global meaning is the lens through which personal experiences are interpreted (Janoff-Bulman & Franz, 1997).

Distress that results from the discrepancy between situational and global meaning requires a way of engaging with this discordance in order to find new meaning. Seeking meaning or sense-seeking is thought to reflect a meaning system that cannot adequately inform the situation (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Thus, growth is assumed when a person is able to restore meaning through the reconstruction or amendment of either their global meaning. Although theoretically rich, there are few studies that explain how new meaning is restored. This study’s use of retrospective narratives will examine this process, which heretofore has largely been theoretical. An important question is whether the disruption and subsequent rebuilding of meaning is actually one mechanism of growth, and if so, how does this reconstruction of a person’s worldview happen?

**Outcomes of Positive Adult Development**

Positive developmental outcomes in adulthood cut across many theoretical and research foundations. In this study, various disciplines were drawn upon with the hope that they would collectively illuminate aspects of positive development beyond the attributes provided by a single discipline. These include the fields of resilience, life span developmental theory, stress and trauma-related growth, wisdom and optimal aging. The field of resilience provides a
framework of three broad categories of positive outcomes: recovery (how well a person bounces back from a challenge), sustainability (the capacity to move ahead and sustain positive meaning) (Bonanno, 2004; Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2010), and growth (Zautra et al., 2010).

From a life span perspective of personality development, personality adjustment involves “achieving, maintaining, or regaining well being and quality of life” (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010, p. 256) and is similar to resilience outcomes of recovery and sustainability. Personality growth is theorized to require experiences that force persons to reevaluate themselves and the world (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010). Staudinger and Bowen described personality growth as personal wisdom, defined by changes in cognition (e.g., insight and self knowledge), emotion (e.g., emotional complexity or dialectics), motivation for the greater good, and “transcendence of ego-centeredness” (2010, p. 256). Similarly, transcendent wisdom is described by self-knowledge, non-attachment, and integrating these understandings, as evidenced by compassion towards self and others (Curnow, 2011). Thus, it is theorized that especially in later life, personality adjustments to challenges are common, whereas growth is more rare, yet both reflect positive adult development (for a review, see Staudinger & Bowen, 2010).

The field of posttraumatic growth (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Linley & Joseph, 2004) makes similar distinctions between growth as transformative and adjustment as coping and also have found age differences in PTG. With chronic illness, younger people reported more growth than those in later life (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Age appears to be an important predictor of adjustment or growth but aspects of the difficult life event also seem to influence the prevalence of growth. Rates are as high as 98% in breast cancer patients (Weiss, 2002) and lowest for husbands of breast cancer patients (Weiss, 2002). Understanding the dynamic influence of age, event type, social location of the event, among many other factors such as time
since event, is likely to benefit from a person-centered approach that can view an individual over time.

Adjustment and growth might also be influenced by a person’s tendency to seek well-being that is more hedonic or eudaimonic in tone (Friedman & Ryff, 2012; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Adjustment is associated with hedonic well-being or what is commonly considered to be happiness and subjective well being (SWB), and characterized by seeking positive affective states (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010). Growth is associated with eudaimonic well-being and psychological well-being, and is often described as having a sense of purpose, mastery, and accomplishment (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Orientation towards hedonic and eudaimonic well-being likely contributes to differences in the resilience process and subsequent outcomes of adjustment and growth over time. For example, a person’s tendency to define their well being as hedonic or eudaimonic could influence efforts to up and down regulate their emotions (Bastian, Kuppens, De Roover, & Diener, 2014; Miyamoto, Ma, & Petermann, 2014). It is conceivable that a resilience process influenced by a hedonic orientation would result in outcomes of adjustment but risk early foreclosure on growth.

**Present Study**

The purpose of this study was to expand our understanding of the process of positive adult development. How does a person achieve growth beyond adjustment? The subject of positive adult development is central to a life span developmental perspective, yet studies that provide details of processes of growth following adversity are limited. Fifty semi-structured interviews of older adults who recalled a difficult or challenging life event, and their subsequent thoughts and behaviors, were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This study will identify the mechanisms that facilitate transformative
growth, and more closely examine whether growth after adversity requires a disruption to a person’s sense of meaning.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

How are various processes of resilience linked to the outcomes of adjustment and growth? To address this question, we reviewed selected literature to provide a brief overview of the construct of resilience, presented various constructs of positive outcomes, and examined what is known about how individuals use meaning in their processes of resilience. The social environment is important to the resilience process; thus, literature that is focused on how individuals navigate and negotiate their social environment in the context of adversity is reviewed.

Resilience

The multiple pathways of resilience in adulthood reflect the rich, multidimensional contributions of individuals, their social networks, and environment in dealing with difficult life events (Aldwin & Igarashi, 2012; Luthar, 2006; Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1993; Zautra et al., 2010). How adults cope with difficulties is important to deepen our understanding of development across the life course. A Google Scholar search with the words “adult resilience” yielded about 303,000 results (retrieved October 10, 2015) that reflect how important resilience is an organizing concept for studying developmental processes. However, widespread use of the term “resilience” has also generated confusion because of multiple definitions and applications (Allen, Haley, Harris, Fowler, & Pruthi, 2011). Further complications involve the inconsistent use of resilience to describe individual traits, processes, and outcomes.

The term resilience comes from the physical and biological sciences that emphasized resilience as recovery – a return to an original state (Walker & Salt, 2006). Early work in human resilience was focused on child development where developmental markers were used to
measure recovery, or a return to normal, when children were exposed to situations of adversity such as abuse and poverty (Luthar, 2006; Masten & Reed, 2002; Werner & Smith, 2001). It was something of a surprise that in spite of such risk, recovery, was more common than previously thought and thus considered “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2001). This early work established two key parameters for definitions of resilience – the presence of threat or adversity and recovery (Zautra et al., 2010). Luthar summarized resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation with the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). This definition emphasizes resilience as a process within a context of adversity and suggests that positive adaptation is an outcome of that process.

The framework of resilience has expanded beyond outcomes of recovery to include sustainability of purpose and growth (Murray & Zautra, 2012; Zautra et al., 2010). Sustainability refers to perseverance: the ability to keep a sense of purpose, goal directedness, and meaning during or following adversity (Murray & Zautra, 2012; Zautra et al., 2010). Zautra and his colleagues have described growth as finding benefits, new meaning, and developing new skills that have arisen out of dealing with difficulty (Murray & Zautra, 2012; Zautra et al., 2010). Growth is the outcome of a resilience process and distinct from recovery – a “homeostatic process” of returning to a former state (Zautra et al., 2010, p. 6).

**Outcomes of Resilience Processes**

Recovery and sustaining positive function in the context of adversity have been the primary outcomes in the resilience literature. The range of outcomes has been expanded to include growth in recent models of resilience (Zautra et al., 2010) and thus, permits the construct of resilience to be more relevant to the study of positive adult development. Positive, transformational change within the context of adversity has long been a subject of religion,
philosophy, literature, and more recently psychology (for a review see Aldwin, Park, & Spiro, 2007). A discussion of how this process might occur begins with what defines growth and how this outcome is distinguished from other forms of positive development.

Defining growth is not a simple task. Definitions are limited by our methods of measurement, as well as by our ability to thoughtfully describe the variety of ways individuals experience and demonstrate positive change. Definitions of growth are commonly focused on outcomes that reflect positive change but can also be viewed through process related indicators such as flexibility in cognition and high affective complexity (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010). Defining growth is further complicated by critiques about whether a person has only perceived growth in a self-protective manner, or has experienced actual growth, and how this distinction makes a difference to the lived experience (Ford, Tennen, & Albert, 2012; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). Because of these challenges, a wide net is cast to identify ways of describing growth including other aspects of positive development. Definitions and constructs from the scholarly literature on life span developmental theory, resilience, posttraumatic growth, stress-related growth, and wisdom were used.

**Growth constructs of life span developmental perspectives.** Growth within the context of difficult life events fits well within the life span approach that posits development as characterized by losses and gains (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). Definitions of positive change or growth can be understood through the constructs of positive adult development that include changes in values and goal structure (Brandstätter, 1999; Hooker & McAdams, 2003), improvements in social relationships (Carstensen, Mikels, & Mather, 2006), a greater sense of coping and mastery (Aldwin, Sutton, & Lachman, 1996), opportunities for
turning points (Elder & Shanahan, 2006), spiritual development (Tornstam, 1994), and greater self-directed development (Aldwin, Levenson, & Kelly, 2009).

Plasticity, or a person’s flexibility, throughout life is central to developmental systems theory (DST; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2006) and posits that these changes are directed by personal preferences and sociocultural influences (Ford & Lerner, 1992). This is an important distinction because it emphasizes that individuals may differ in their goal selection but may also be influenced by their cultural milieu. For example, happiness as an objective has become prominent in western cultures and might influence individual goals that boost hedonic well-being such as having fun and enjoying a comfortable retirement (see Staudinger & Bowen, 2010). Similarly, a cultural narrative of redemption (McAdams, 2006b) might influence a belief that positive change is possible after a disruptive life event and have a bearing on reports of growth post-trauma (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

Staudinger and Bowen’s (2010) life span perspective of adult personality development also provides insight into positive development within a broad context of challenge. Positive personality development is described by two distinct meta-goals: adjustment and growth. Similar to concepts of resilience, adjustment is described as a “fundamental human strength” where a person makes the most of a situation by “achieving, maintaining, or regaining well-being and quality of life” (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010, p 256). Growth involves “changes in the personality system that aim at the transcendence of given circumstances…for accomplishing a greater good for oneself and others” and requires new and challenging experiences to “force individuals to reconsider and reevaluate how they see themselves and the world” (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010, p. 256-257).
Staudinger and Bowen suggested that an objective measure of growth involves personal wisdom characterized by a person’s self-knowledge, self-regulation, and “emancipation of thought and feeling and transcendence of the structures within which we have been socialized” (2010, p. 257). This perspective is complementary to the liberative model of human development (Levenson & Crumpler, 1996) where the goal is transcendent wisdom.

**Posttraumatic growth.** Distinct from recovery, posttraumatic growth (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) is a phenomenon of positive change that goes beyond pre-incident levels following a “highly challenging life demand” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004, p. 96). PTG specifically involves a qualitative change in functioning and, for some individuals, “radical personal transformations that arise from the individual’s struggle with highly challenging life demands” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 4). Growth is conceptualized within PTG to occur through the resolution or accommodation of shattered assumptions of the world and self (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995); consequently, recovery is understood to be different from PTG.

In a review of 39 empirical studies (Linley & Joseph, 2004), the prevalence rate of PTG ranged between 3% (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998) and 98% (Weiss, 2002). Differences in study design (i.e., cross-sectional, longitudinal, prospective, and retrospective), differences in measures, event types, and timing of the measurements (i.e. time since target event) have made a systematic examination of PTG difficult. Understandably, baseline measures were not available in most studies, which has complicated the measurement of positive change in various domains (for a review see Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). Although the experience of perceived growth post trauma is not questioned, the frequency and qualitative distinctions of
PTG are unclear and could result in unrealistic expectations on the part of trauma survivors of particular outcomes.

An interesting distinction between recovery and PTG is emphasized by Zoellner & Maercker's (2006) statement, that “there is no evidence to date that PTG is necessary for successful recovery from trauma” (p. 651). This suggests that resilience outcomes of recovery or sustaining positive activity are not contradictory to PTG but are different types of successful outcomes. Indeed, there are strong arguments that resilience and symptoms of PTSD should be considered as independent, orthogonal constructs in a manner similar to positive and negative affect (Luthar et al., 2000; Park & Helgeson, 2006; Shalev & Errera, 2008). Thus, individuals can be both symptomatic and experience post-traumatic growth (Hobfoll et al., 2008).

Based on studies which investigated the factor structure of the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) growth is described by five domains: “see new possibilities, changed relationships, the paradoxical view of being both stronger yet more vulnerable, a greater appreciation for life, and changes in the individual’s spiritual and existential domain” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004, p. 96). A three-factor solution has also been found that includes changes in relationship with others, changes in view of self, and changes in life philosophy (Joseph, Linley, & Harris, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). However, it remains an open question whether growth is multidimensional as suggested by factor analysis, or a single dimension because these multidimensional factors are highly correlated (Park & Lechner, 2006). Critical questions have also been raised about whether the PTGI’s retrospective and self-evaluative format increases the risk of positivity bias and task overload (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). Implicit in these critiques is the issue of how change, but specifically growth, can be systematically measured.
**Stress-related growth.** Stress-related growth (SRG) broadens the construct of PTG by including exposure to chronic and everyday stressors as types of adversity that can promote growth (Aldwin & Igarashi, 2012; Aldwin & Levenson, 2004). Similar to PTG, SRG is defined as “actual or veridical changes that people have made in relation to their experience with an identified stressful or traumatic event” (Park, 2008, p. 12).

In addition to SRG and PTG, there are several other constructs, such as perceived benefits (McMillen & Fisher, 1998) and thriving (Abraido-Lanza, Guier, & Colon, 1998), that are considered forms of “adversarial growth” where the processes of dealing with adversity “propel the individual to a higher level of functioning than that which existed prior to the event” (Linley & Joseph, 2004, p. 11). Adversarial growth (AG) typically is measured by self-report questionnaires such as the post-traumatic growth inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), stress-related growth scale (SRGS; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), and the perceived benefit scale (PBS; McMillen & Fisher, 1998). As described earlier, the PTGI has five subscales, the SRGS is best described as a single factor (Cohen, Hettler, & Pane, 1998), and the PBS has eight positive change subscales (i.e. enhanced or increased self-efficacy, community closeness, spirituality, compassion, faith in people, family closeness, lifestyle changes, and material gain; McMillen & Fisher, 1998). These differences in growth domains complicate meaningful comparisons across studies and keeps growth broadly defined as positive change.

Coyne and Tennen (2010) raised several questions about whether respondents can accurately evaluate their standing on a particular dimension (e.g. sense of closeness with others) from the PTGI and then make assessments of the degree of change from pre to post-incident. Further, Coyne and Tennen stated that research has demonstrated that people cannot accurately assess personal change (Costa & McCrae, 1989; Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994),
suggesting studies claiming growth following trauma are based on unreliable measurements. This position is well articulated, however, it does not address whether the personal perception of change matters (even if illusory), and if domains of perceived change are evidenced in new behaviors over time.

*Personal growth and psychological well-being.* Ryff’s framework of positive adult development is based on theories of personality development, life-span developmental theory, and clinical psychology and is a measure of mental health (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1996; Ryff, Singer, Love, & Essex, 1998). The six dimensions are: (1) environmental mastery (competence with managing one’s environment); (2) self-acceptance (positive attitudes towards self); (3) autonomy (self-determining and independent); (4) positive social relations (has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships); (5) personal growth (sees self as growing and expanding); and (6) purpose in life (has direction and aims in life). Of these dimensions, personal growth best reflects personality maturity (Staudinger & Dorner, 2006).

Ryff’s conceptualization of psychological well-being is largely an eudaimonic perspective in contrast to a hedonic orientation such as subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Specifically, personal growth, “of all the aspects of well-being…comes closest in meaning to Aristotle’s eudaimonia, as it is explicitly concerned with the self-realization of the individual” and the ongoing process of developing one’s potential (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 21). Eudaimonia is a meaning focused perspective that includes self-acceptance, focus on the present, engagement with life, generativity, positive attitudes, openness to experiences, and social interactions (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Growth following adversity has been conceptualized as eudaimonic and is reflected by an increase in PWB, in contrast to subjective well-being (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Joseph &
Linley, 2005). Measuring changes in PWB is the aim of the Psychological Well-Being Post-Traumatic Changes Questionnaire (PWB-PTCQ; Joseph et al., 2012). This measure was developed in response to critiques that growth was inadequately defined by various measures, such as PTGI, SRGS, PBS, and TS, and lacked a theoretical framework (see Joseph & Linley, 2008). The personal growth scale (PG) of Ryff’s psychological well-being scale (RPWB; Ryff, 1989) reflects how a person sees their continued development and potential in the future. A person who scores high in PG sees “the self as growing and expanding…as changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness” (Ryff, 1989, p. 1072).

The environmental mastery scale (EM) of Ryff’s psychological well-being scale (RPWB; Ryff, 1989) is comparable to adjustment. EM relates to competence and success in the external world – an important pre-condition but also a result of resilience or successful adjustment. Those who score high in EM have “a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment, makes effective use of surrounding opportunities” (Ryff, 1989, p. 1072). Factor analysis found that environmental mastery and personal growth loaded onto separate factors (Staudinger & Dorner, 2006). Low correlation between the EM and PG scales also provides support for conceptualizing EM and PG as separate constructs (Helson & Srivastava, 2002; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997). EM loaded onto an agency subfactor of adjustment (Staudinger & Dorner, 2006).

Using Ryff’s PWB construct allows for researchers to have a common understanding about growth domains where a substantial body of research has been conducted. For example, Helson and Srivastava (2001) applied Ryff’s scales of personal growth and environmental mastery to examine varieties of positive adult development and how they are associated with criteria of maturity such as generativity, competence, wisdom, and ego development.
Growth as wisdom. Wisdom has long been considered a marker of growth. Similar to the difficulties in defining and measuring growth, wisdom as a psychological construct has also been difficult to operationalize (Ardelt, 2010; Glück et al., 2013). Borrowed from the ancient Greeks, psychologists make distinctions about wisdom between expertise in making practical choices (phronesis) and transformational personal wisdom (sophia) (cf., Aldwin, 2009). The Berlin Wisdom Project (cf., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) described wisdom predominately in practical terms as dimensions of factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, life-span contextualism, values relativism, and tolerance of uncertainty. Expertise in these areas favors optimization of adjustment to difficulties in life. In contrast, wisdom understood in the sophia tradition is equated with self-transcendence defined as rising above personal interest for the greater good by letting go of assumptions and preconceived ideas (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005; Staudinger & Bowen, 2010). Transcendent wisdom requires learning about one’s self, seeing situations for what they are, and integrating this understanding into compassion towards one’s self and others (Curnow, 2011). Essential to transcendent wisdom is emancipation of thoughts and feelings from social conditioning. This particular goal of development is central to such concepts as emancipatory knowledge-constitutive interest (Habermas, 1971), the liberative model of development (Levenson & Crumpler, 1996), and “transcendence of ego centeredness” (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010, p. 256).

Both forms of wisdom reflect positive development and are interrelated, yet are distinct in their focal points. As mentioned earlier, knowledge-based wisdom facilitates adjustment to changing life circumstances by “achieving, maintaining, or regaining well being and quality of life” (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010 p 256). In contrast, when wisdom is measured as transcendent wisdom, life satisfaction and wisdom were not correlated (Wink & Helson, 1997). Wisdom and
eudaimonic values of well-being (e.g. personal growth, pursuit of meaning, contribution to others) were more strongly associated than values of hedonic well-being (e.g. fun, pleasure of self) (Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2010). Within the context of a difficult life event, life satisfaction, as a measure of hedonic well-being, may not be guaranteed (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). However, the development of personal wisdom “require[s] new, challenging experiences that force individuals to reconsider and reevaluate how they see themselves and the world” (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010, p. 256) and this process may reduce hedonic tone as will be discussed in the next section.

**Summary.** Orientation to a hedonic or eudaimonic perspective could conceivably place a person on a different trajectory of development where subjective well-being and personal wisdom are differentially developed. Although these are not mutually exclusive orientations, it is reasonable to consider that a preference for positive affect, for example, might affect choices made in the context of adversity. For example, a person for whom their social network relies on them for a positive, uplifting influence may also feel compelled to demonstrate adjustment to a stressful event, provide hedonic tone for themselves and their network, and prematurely limit introspection that might increase distress but also lead to personal wisdom. On the other hand, life events can be catalysts to transformation or turning points, where a different approach to life is taken with different outcomes. Is adjustment to life difficulties more common than growth? Is a process that results in growth triggered by a failure of adjustment, or an immediately transformative event? These are questions that will be addressed in this study and are informed by the following literature review.
Processes of Resilience: An Overview

How does a person progress from adversity to positive outcomes of adjustment and growth? As mentioned earlier, this is a long-standing question explored in literature, religion, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology among other disciplines (cf., Aldwin, 2007). The importance of this question is clear: how to relieve suffering and also promote growth. A complete review of this literature exceeds the scope of this study. Instead, this review is focused on two fruitful, yet still expansive, topics. The first area involves the search for meaning in life and its role in well-being and growth. The quest for meaning is a normal developmental process (Bruner, 1990; Wong, 2012) and is especially important following difficult and traumatic life events (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2004; Park, 2010). A person’s meaning in life is influenced by universal, cultural, and family values that can define, but also limit, what is sought (Bastian et al., 2014; Bruner, 1990; Miyamoto et al., 2014). Second, a person’s social context is important to resilience (Masten & Obradovic, 2008), thus, considering the interplay between individuals and their social world regarding meaning can help to understand network barriers to and supports for adjustment and growth.

Meaning and Processes of Resilience. Following a major stressful event, how a person makes sense of life is central to prominent theories of adjustment and growth (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2004; Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Such efforts involve both spontaneous and deliberate attempts to cognitively process the event within a person’s meaning framework (e.g. schemas, assumptive world). Difficult life events shake up but sometimes “shatter our fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our world” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 169). The resilience process thus involves taking stock of our self and our world in the aftermath of a difficulty, and ultimately making an effort to resolve discrepancies in life’s personal meaning.
Struggling with discrepancies can result in meaning that becomes incorporated into an “internalized and evolving self-narrative” (McAdams, 2006a, p 86).

For most, meaning in life is an important resource throughout life (Wong, 2012). In an internet-based study of 8,756 adults, the presence of meaning in life was positively correlated with greater well-being at all stages of life, whereas reports of searching for meaning were associated with lower well-being (Steger et al., 2009). Meaning in life referred to the “extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or over-arching aim in life” (Steger et al., 2009, p. 43). Making sense of life involves a philosophy of life that is articulated in assumptions, beliefs, values, and worldviews (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004; Wong, 2012; Wong & Weiner, 1981).

A person’s framework about how life works serves as a way to make choices and evaluate experiences in life. For example, a hedonic perspective of well-being emphasizes a personal happiness mindset of positive emotions and experiences, and an absence of negative emotions (Joseph & Heffron, 2013; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Wong, 2012). Popular idioms such as “don’t worry, be happy” reflect a happiness preference in American culture (Staudinger & Bowen, 2010), and there is a robust body of research that supports the benefits of positive emotions (for a review, see Pressman & Cohen, 2005). In contrast, a eudaimonic perspective emphasizes life satisfaction that comes from a reflective, meaning-seeking orientation focused on purpose in life. Researchers of posttraumatic growth, for example, posit that eudaimonic-based well-being can be an outcome of trauma when life’s meaning, values, and aspirations are clarified (Joseph & Heffron, 2013). Both orientations can provide important resources to the resilience process,
however, a eudaimonic perspective may be especially relevant when our sense of the world is challenged by difficult life events.

**Definitions of meaning.** Overall, meaning is a “mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus meaning connects things” (Baumeister, 1991, p. 15). More specifically, meaning within the context of challenge is distinguished as situational or specific meaning (Frankl, 1959; Park, 2010; Reker & Chamberlain, 2000) and global (Park & Folkman, 1997), ultimate (Frankl, 1959), or existential (Reker & Chamberlain, 2000).

Situational meaning is the meaning a person gives to a particular event through their initial appraisals (Park, 2010). These appraised meanings are often instantaneous, although subject to revision (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Examples of early attributions include ideas about why an event occurred, if the event is threatening or within one’s ability to address, or how the future is affected by the event are facets of appraised meaning (for review, see Aldwin, 2007).

Global meaning refers to a person’s broad assemblage of beliefs about the world, goals in life, and subjective feelings (Reker & Wong, 1988) that form the lens through which personal experiences are interpreted (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997). Global meaning is thought to form early in life and continue to be modified based on personal experiences (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). This framework is an interpretive meaning system that influences thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Park, 2010). A similar concept is the schema of the “assumptive world” that reflects what a person assumes to be true about the self and world based on previous experiences (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This personalized view of reality is the basis for our expectations of, and orientation to the world.
Existential meaning reflects a person’s philosophy of life from which a sense of life is made (Wong, 2010). Existential meaning often involves questions such as “Who am I,” “What should I do with my life to make it worthwhile,” and “What happens after death” (Wong, 2010). Following a traumatic event, the existential questions are focused on two types of meaning: comprehensibility and significance (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). Comprehensibility involves efforts to make sense of the causes of the event (Taylor, 1983) and typically involves previously held ideas about causes and effect. For example, in order to preserve beliefs in a safe and predictable world, there are high incidences of self-blame by victims (“I should have done x”) and blaming the victim by others (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). Attempts to address comprehensibility lead to questions of significance: “What does my life mean now?” (Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Taylor, 1983).

**Meaning-Based Resilience Processes.** Meaning-based models of stress-and trauma-related growth can be understood as examples of the resilience process because growth is viewed within the context of adversity. Theories that share this cognitive perspective propose that appraisals of the traumatic events (i.e. situational meaning) disrupts or violates a person’s existing global belief system and, if unresolved, this results in negative beliefs about the self and world.

Park’s (2010) meaning-making model integrates concepts drawn collectively from the work of prominent researchers (e.g. Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Lepore & Helgeson, 1998; Neimeyer, 2001; Park & Folkman, 1997; Taylor, 1983) who studied adaptation to stressful life events. This model assumes that individuals possess an orienting system of global meaning from which personal experiences are interpreted. It hypothesized that, after a potentially stressful event is appraised, distress occurs if the situational meaning is found to challenge or be in
conflict with a person’s global meaning, thus efforts are made with meaning making to reduce this discrepancy. If successful, “a sense of the world as meaningful and their own lives as worthwhile” is restored (Park, 2010, p. 258).

Research in stress-related growth (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004; Park, 2010) and posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) suggest that personal growth can occur after a difficult life event when the ability to think dialectically, “may set in motion somewhat different trajectories of posttraumatic growth” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004, p. 101). The cognitive processing theory of PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) posits that trauma challenges a person’s beliefs about oneself and the world, as well as life goals. The use of thinking about the event, re-evaluation, and redefinition helps people to find meaning in the event, which is ultimately experienced as growth.

Concepts such as disruptions to global meaning and the subsequent cognitive processes are central to meaning-oriented models of PTG and SRG; however, barriers exist to effectively test these theorized processes. For example, if distress is the result of discordance between situational and global meaning, adequate testing of this hypothesis requires some understanding of a person’s worldview prior to the event. This can be a difficult task if done prospectively because meaning systems may be largely unconscious until brought to awareness by stress. Also, the very nature of a difficult or traumatic life event is its unpredictable occurrence, which further complicates assessment of global meaning prior to the target event. Consequently, for most studies, a person’s engagement in meaning seeking or questioning meaning post adversity has been assumed to indicate discordance between meaning systems (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). The reasoning is simple: one would not be seeking meaning if their global framework could provide an understanding for their thoughts and emotions surrounding the event. Another
assumption is that the cognitive processes involved in restoring, rebuilding, or making new meaning results in growth. We reviewed literature to examine aspects of these theoretical assumptions.

*Meaning discordance, meaning seeking and distress.* What support exists for the rationale that links meaning seeking to distress? In a rare prospective study of bereaved, late-life adults, the relationship between searching for meaning, finding meaning, and outcomes of adjustment (i.e., grief, depression, and positive affect) was examined (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). Searching for meaning at both 6 and 18 months post-loss positively predicted depressive symptoms (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010, p. 820). However, a remarkable 70% of the sample reported that at 6 months, post-loss, they had not searched for meaning in the prior month. This percentage should be viewed with caution because in the Changing Lives of Older Couples (CLOC) data, older age, higher baseline anxiety, and a lack of homeownership were significant predictors of attrition from pre-loss baseline to 6 month post-loss (Carr, 2004; Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010).

In a sample of college students who had experienced the death of a family member or friend, lower levels of sense-making were associated with higher scores on a grief measure (Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006). Conversely, in a study of parents whose child had died from sudden infant death syndrome, an objectively traumatic situation, 14% of parents reported they had not searched for meaning within 3 weeks after their loss and had as good or better mental health outcomes than individuals who had successfully searched for meaning (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000). Consistent with these results was a study conducted by Bonanno, Wortman, and Nesse (2004), in which five distinct trajectories of depression were modeled following the death of a spouse. The “resilient” group was made up of individuals who
did not have symptoms of depression before or after the death of their spouse and this group had the highest number of those who were not searching for meaning at 6 and 18 months post loss.

**Resolving disruptions to meaning.** In a retrospective study of adult survivors of childhood incest, women who had made “some sense” of their trauma reported better social adjustment, higher self esteem, and fewer symptoms than those who reported they had made ‘no sense” of their abuse (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). Sense making is similar to other cognitive processing theories in its focus on efforts to rectify gaps in understanding (Dervin, 1992; Weick, 1979). Similarly, in a sample of World War II veterans, the perception of benefits, a type of sense-making, in military service was associated with lower PTSD symptoms (Aldwin, Levenson, & Spiro, 1994).

There are a limited number of prospective longitudinal studies that examine the relationship between sense-making and positive outcomes, and the results are mixed. In a random sample of those in the United States following the 9/11 terrorist attack, sense-making at two months was predictive of a decrease in posttraumatic symptoms two years later, after controlling for degree of exposure, stress symptoms at two months, and pre-event psychological diagnoses (Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). Similarly, a study of older, bereaved spouses found that six and 18-month sense-making predicted reports of positive affect at 48 months (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010) suggesting that early resolutions of meaning had lasting and positive effects on future outcomes.

However, a study of bereaved family members whose loved one was under hospice care yielded different results (Davis et al., 1998). Initially, those who reported a sense of meaning at six months had low levels of distress, but at 13 months there was only a marginal effect of having had meaning at six months on decreased distress (controlling for pre-loss distress), and at
18 months there was no effect of earlier meaning on distress (Davis et al., 1998). Perhaps the early sense making was a type of coping that buffered the immediate distress but limited further exploration and resolution. Another result that does not support the assumption of meaning finding and positive outcomes were based on the trajectories of bereaved individuals (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004). The proportion of individuals who searched for and found meaning was significantly greatest among the chronic grief group (29%) at 18 months (Bonanno et al., 2004, p. 266). This group had low levels of depressive symptoms pre-loss but reported high levels at 6 and 18 months post-loss. These results suggest that understanding the nature of the meaning-found cannot be assumed to be uniformly positive in tone, or alternatively, that the type of meaning found could be independent of affective states of depression.

Taken together, these limited results suggest an association between concurrent sense-making and greater well being and reduced distress, however, the effect of earlier sense-making on subsequent positive adjustment were weak or non-existent. Differences in findings could be due to variations in measures, timing of measures, type of stressful event, or the relationship between adversity type and network support. For example, the strongest positive results for earlier sense making and subsequent well-being was the study of 9/11 in which there were substantial, on-going, and even world-wide attempts at sense-making in the media. Although individuals were differentially impacted, millions witnessed the 9/11 attacks. Another area of exploration is the dynamic nature of sense-making, and how, over time positive and uplifting sense-making could become more negative as in situations where reminiscence is used to revive feelings of bitterness (Cully, LaVoie, & Gfeller., 2001;Wong & Watt, 1991).

Overall, the studies presented offer support for a search for meaning’s relationship to on-going distress, while the impact of finding meaning is more equivocal and requires more
nuanced understanding. When positive outcomes were concerned, measurements of adjustment (i.e. recovery and sustaining positive function) were the focus. None of the studies reviewed addressed growth-related outcomes such as personal wisdom. Searching for meaning, as we have seen, can be distressing; however, searching can also be viewed as contemplation and reflection – necessary practices for greater self-knowledge and personal wisdom. As discussed earlier, difficult life events have the potential to compel a person to see things differently, to develop self-knowledge, and to increase their compassion for self and others (Curnow, 2011).

**Assimilation and adjustment.** Recovery is best described as adjustment and reflects the process of assimilation (Piaget, 1976, 1980) in which the event and its meaning are understood with little alteration to the assumptive world. A person’s reality is affirmed through the schemas that are activated by the stressful event (Piaget, 1976, 1980) and is seen as a “tension reducing mode of information processing” (Labouvie-Vief, 2009, p. 556).

Janoff-Bulman’s (2004) model of “strength through suffering” is an example of this process where a cultural belief is recalled from the global meaning framework, and used as a way to interpret and cope with the stressful event. The assumptive world is mildly revised by the addition of this experience but does not require an awareness of wrestling with discordant meaning (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). Rather, distress or pain is framed within the existing belief that personal benefit comes from struggling and the results are new awareness of strengths, fortitude, and coping skills. A person can learn and develop new aspects simply through having suffered and survived.

**Accommodation and growth.** Changes in identity, global beliefs, goals, and meaning in life suggest transformative alterations in a person’s assumptive world and thus reflect growth beyond adjustment. Changes to global meaning occur when the situational meaning of a
stressful event is too discordant to allow assimilation to work (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Accommodation (Piaget, 1976, 1980) is an effortful engagement with conflicts created by the discrepancies between situational and global meaning, and is resolved by changes in one’s global beliefs or goals (Park, 2010). Accommodation is a more advantageous process with major, irreversible events (Brandtstädter, 2002) because the process opens pathways of comprehending untenable situations. This suggests that situational factors that require accommodation, such as the perceived severity of event, may be important determinants of growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The process of accommodation is hypothesized to expand one’s “equilibrium zone” (Piaget, 1981) and, thus, increase the ability for complex functioning with lower levels of emotional reactivity (Labouvie-Vief, 2009). However, if the strain of accommodation is too great, maladaptive behavior and deterioration, rather than growth, can occur (Hobfoll, 1989; Labouvie-Vief, 2009).

Janoff-Bulman’s (2004) model of “existential reevaluation” involves significant changes in global meaning because the difficult experience is “more unexpected and difficult to comprehend” (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p. 32). It is hypothesized that many hold the core, pre-trauma belief that “if we are good people (justice) and we engage in appropriately precautionary behaviors (control), bad things will not happen to us” because what happens in the world is not random (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p 33). Previous assumptions of a predictable and controllable world are no longer trustworthy and a sense of fear and fragility are experienced. Unexpected and difficult life events draw people back to domains of safety and the essence of what makes life worth living: an appreciation of being alive, family, friends, and faith (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

Existential reevaluation involves accommodative changes in which beliefs about the world and the self are altered by new, experiential information. Existential reevaluation can
permit a person to see through the illusion of a just world in which individual agency provides protection from harm (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). This shift in recognizing one’s vulnerability is thought to create a deeper appreciation for life’s worth and to move a person “from concerns about the meaning of life to the creation of meaning in life” as evidenced by actions taken to promote what is valued. (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p. 33).

**Summary.** A meaning-oriented approach to understanding a person’s process of resilience requires access to their assumptive world. What was their standpoint prior to the event? What was retained, eliminated, or added to their perspective? Surprisingly, little is known about how the situational meaning of an event impacts global beliefs despite the centrality of this process to the cognitive perspective of PTSD (Park et al., 2012). Although studies of SRG and PTG reported benefit-finding such as appreciation of family or personal growth (see Linley & Joseph, 2004), there are few studies that examine the interconnections between a person’s prior worldview, their situational meaning of the event, their post-event worldview, and outcomes of adjustment, growth, or distress over time.

Several issues hamper studies of meaning and resilience. Primarily, individuals may not know the contours of their assumptive world until there has been some violation as reflected in comments such as “I didn’t think people were like that” or “I never imagined that would happen.” This lack of awareness makes prospective studies of meaning-oriented resilience difficult because pre-event measures to assess the assumptive world would be limited by problems with self-awareness. Retrospective, qualitative data are vulnerable to critiques that a person has revised their history to create a coherent life narrative; however, this type of knowledge “provides deeply personal and wholly unique understanding into what is meaningful and ‘core’ to a person’s life” (Hooker & McAdams, 2003, p. 300). A detailed, reconstructed
perspective could illuminate nuanced aspects of the processes of resilience. In particular, knowledge about how previous views were retained, awakened, relinquished, and replaced following difficult life events would increase our understanding. Other questions could be addressed about how the new worldview translated into daily actions and practice. Finally, qualitative data can tell us about how the assumptive world was created within a person’s social context which includes positive and negative life experiences, self-assessments, social-cultural traditions, resources (e.g. cognitive, emotional, social, financial), as well as knowledge about the experiences of others such as parents and grandparents.

While it is often assumed that revisions to a person’s worldview generally result in positive outcomes, they can also lead to a retreat from life in an attempt to insure safety. It is not clear what predicts outcomes of adjustment, growth, or continued distress. The lifetime prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is 6.8% of the adult population in the United States (Kessler, Chiu, Demier, & Walters, 2005), suggesting we have much to learn. Even in the best of circumstances, changes to one’s worldview following trauma by definition includes negative as well as positive elements that are new and incompletely integrated. Both positive and negative emotions are likely to be experienced (Park, Aldwin, Fenster, & Snyder, 2008). “The positive and negative are inextricably linked…In the aftermath of trauma survivors experience disillusionment and appreciation, unpredictability and preparedness, and vulnerability and strength” (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p. 34). The ability to tolerate mixed affective states may be necessary for those who continue to seek greater understanding of themselves and their world.

Utilizing the Social Environment in the Processes of Resilience

A review of decades of child development research concluded, “resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships” (Luthar, 2006, p. 780). Relationships in adulthood are also an
important resilience resource (Fuller-Iglesias, Sellars, & Antonucci, 2008; King, King, Fairbank, Keane, & Adams, 1998), and have often been studied as social support. A meta-analysis of trauma-exposed adults found that the absence of social support was a leading risk factor in the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000). In spite of decades of research that has demonstrated the positive relationship between social support and mental and physical health outcomes (see Thoits, 2011), the mechanisms of this relationship are not well understood.

The use of social support in the context of adverse life situations has been one stream of investigations to understand how social relationships facilitate health and wellbeing. Social support is considered one of five broad types of coping that include problem focused, emotion focused, religious coping, and meaning making (Aldwin & Yancura, 2011). Social support coping includes the provision of information, advice, assistance, and encouragement that may aid in problem solving or lessen negative affect (Suitor & Pillemer, 2000). Thoits (1986) theorized that supportive others such as family and friends provide coping assistance that can help individuals feel a greater sense of mastery, esteem, as well as provide new ways of interpreting their situation. Such functions can buffer the effects of stress and facilitate recovery that leads to wellbeing. But less is understood about the process of how social support facilitates outcomes of growth beyond adjustment (Feeney & Collins, 2014). Thus, we focus our review on that literature and begin with a brief primer on social support.

**Definitions and constructs.** The construct of social support is nuanced; however, social support has often been operationalized as general categories of perceived, received, or provided support (for review see Nurullah, 2012). Perceived support is a subjective belief that support is available if needed and has been the focus of social support research (Frazier, Tix, & Barnett,
Received support refers to the experience of being a recipient of emotional (e.g. listening), informational (e.g. advice), and instrumental (e.g. babysitting) actions (Schultz & Schwarzer, 2004). In fact, social support has typically been understood as emotional, informational, and instrumental functions provided to an individual by their family, relatives, and friends (House & Kahn, 1985; Thoits, 2011). More recently, the concept of who provides these supports has been expanded beyond the informal and intimate relationships of significant others (Sullivan, 1953) to include members from secondary groups such as those from work, community, or religious organizations (Thoits, 2011). Granovetter (1973) made similar distinctions in his descriptions of strong and weak ties where relationships were distinguished by their degree of intimacy of disclosure, reciprocity, emotional intensity, and time spent together.

Both the specific types of support (functional) and the social characteristic of the support providers (structural) are important to understand the mechanisms of social support. Thoits (2011) theorized that the effectiveness of supportive behaviors such as “emotional sustenance” (e.g. listening, comforting, accompanying) or instrumental assistance tends to be greater when provided by significant others (p. 152). However, significant others, because of their own distress or lack of specific experience, can be ineffective when they minimize or encourage a quick resolution to a loved one’s distress. In contrast, experientially-similar others from the secondary group members may be more effective in providing emotional and information support that is tailored to the needs of the person in distress (Thoits, 2011). A study of 80 parents of children with cancer supported the importance of distinguishing between significant and similar others regarding the type of support provided (Gage-Bouchard, LaValley, Panagakis, & Shelton, 2015). Pre-existing networks of significant others provided important logistical, routine, and financial support to facilitate the parents’ new responsibilities to their ill child,
however, their uninformed and unsolicited advice was seen as unhelpful. Parents who created new relationships with similar others felt they had cracked the code of navigating the hospital setting by learning from those who had already been there. Parents experienced emotional support and hope from experientially-similar others, and their children did as well because they saw other children who were just like them. Another example of the greater effectiveness of specific others involved New Zealand police officers who talked about their trauma and received positive peer communications had lower PTSD scores (Stephens & Long, 2000).

Distinctions in social support are important in exploring how social support facilitates a resilience outcome of growth beyond adjustment. Significant others may provide a sense of safety and reassurance immediately after an adverse life event that would support recovery. However, that safe harbor of family and friends may not be a resource for exploring and delving into difficult questions regarding disrupted meaning in life. Resources within the broader social environment, particularly from experientially-similar others, may be better able to respond to such challenges. The changing needs of an individual across time are implicit in the resilience process, however, issues of temporality in social support are rarely addressed in research due to the limitations of prevalent cross sectional designs. What a person needs on day one is likely to change over time if that process is to facilitate growth.

**Social environment and growth.** Theories of growth following adversity have referred to the importance of a person’s social resources for growth (Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). Janoff-Bulman (2004) theorized that rebuilding the shattered assumptive world involved internal processes that required the external world and interactions with others. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004) theorized that posttraumatic growth was influenced by social resources, personality, and schema revision. In particular, disclosure to supportive others
facilitated cognitive processing that led to growth through exposure to alternative ways of understanding the traumatic event.

Other theories have proposed how social support contributes to growth. McMillen (2004) suggested there was a direct relationship between social support and growth through the experience of people who were kind and helpful, which facilitated a greater appreciation of relationships. Schaefer and Moos (1992) theorized that social support could reduce the perception of threat in a life crisis through provision of resources and thus enhance opportunities for growth. Janoff-Bulman (1992) and Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (1995) theories suggest that the degree of meaning disruption is related to activities of cognitive processing which lead to growth, whereas McMillan and Schaefer and Moos suggest that the helpfulness of the social support facilitates growth-related experiences. Although possibly complementary, there are differences in how these theories regard the amount of distress necessary to motivate activities that result in growth beyond adjustment. Is there a just right amount of distress that can prompt growth yet not disable a person? Clearly individual differences would be reflected in the experience of distress and possible growth. Despite an emphasis on different aspects of social support and potential growth mechanisms, these theories share common ground in endorsing the importance of the social environment to provide instrumental, emotional, and informational support that facilitates growth; however, research testing these ideas has been limited (Helgeson & Lopez, 2010).

A review of 33 studies examined the relationship between the social environment and outcomes of growth, and found mixed results (see Helgeson & Lopez, 2010). These studies included a variety of adversities such as bereavement, natural disaster, assault, breast cancer, and other illnesses, but were limited by generic, single measures of support, largely cross sectional
designs, and were focused on adjustment rather than growth. Measures of growth were often included as part of a battery of measures. The authors concluded that, although there was evidence for a relationship between the social environment and growth in just over half of the studies, they believed that the role of the social environment in facilitating growth should be investigated. They recommended that future studies include multiple dimensions of the social environment, utilize “more naturalistic” field approaches to investigate the processes involved, and include attributes of the stressor (Helgeson & Lopez, 2010, p. 326). It is necessary to address these gaps in the literature in order to understand how the social environment facilitates adjustment and growth.

Relevant to the current study were studies that examined the relationship between received social support and growth over time. Most longitudinal studies are hampered by the lack of baseline measurements of growth variables. This is an understandable challenge since many study participants are identified once a specific event, such as a cancer diagnosis, has occurred. We present four studies with longitudinal designs of varying lengths and all pertaining to cancer patients. We begin chronologically with Schwarzer and colleagues (2006) who found cross-sectional relationships between received support and benefit finding at T1 (prior to surgery) and T3 (12 months later) but not at T2 (3 months after surgery). Participants were German adults \((N = 480, \text{Mage} = 62, \text{SD} = 11.8)\) diagnosed with different types of cancer. Interestingly, received emotional support at T1 predicted benefit finding at all three measurement time points but later levels of social support did not account for further variance.

Schroevers and colleagues (2009) examined the relationship between three types of social support (i.e. perceived emotional, received emotional, and dissatisfaction with emotional support) and posttraumatic growth eight years later with long-term cancer survivors \((N = 206,\)
**Age = 61.9, SD = 13.6). Only received emotional support three months after diagnosis was positively related to posttraumatic growth eight years later. These results were somewhat contradictory to a small study of cancer patients (Scrignaro, Barni, & Magrin, 2010). The patients (N = 131, Mage = 52, SD=7.7) who received satisfactory emotional support from significant others at Time 1 experienced more PTG than those who did not receive such support, but 6 months later social support from Time 1 was not related to PTG at Time 2 Rather, the Time 1 variables that were significantly related to Time 2 PTG were self-distraction, active coping, turning to religion, planning, and having a caregiver that supported autonomy. The author concluded that beyond early emotional support, cancer patients should be “encouraged to discover their intentional and proactive nature” (p. 8).

Most recently, an attempt to distinguish between cancer-specific and general social support and their relationships to PTG were central to a twelve-month longitudinal study (McDonough, Sabiston, & Wrosch, 2014). The participants were all women (N = 173, Mage = 55.40, SD = 10.99). In contrast to other cancer studies, Time 1 was after treatment was completed, and subsequent measurements were at 3 and 6 months. This is important to note because the experience from diagnosis through treatment is likely a time of great uncertainty and anxiety. Breast cancer-specific worry measured only at T2 and breast cancer specific social support measured only at T2 were positively correlated with PTG at T2 and T3, but general stress (T2) and general social support (T2) were not.

What can be concluded from this these longitudinal studies? Taken together, these studies suggested that early emotional support for cancer patients is positively related to PTG; However, Scrignaro’s (2010) study indicated that the early benefits of received support should be followed by an encouragement to engage in problem-focused coping to facilitate psychological
growth. This result supports the idea that the type of social support needs change over time (Jacobsen, 1986). Even when the broad category of received emotional support is correlated with growth over time, the nuances that would help us to understand this process are often not explicit. Consequently, we do not know why emotional social support helps a person to growth. Does that support represent something about personal and social environment resources? Does emotional social support as a generic category actually change in specific ways over time? How do individuals transact with their social environment to negotiate with this support to navigate to additional resources that promote growth? These are some of the questions we hope to address.

**Present Study**

The purpose of this study was to expand our understanding of positive adult development through an exploration of resilience processes in adulthood. Although it is now widely accepted that adjustment, and even growth, can occur after adversity, the processes involved in the development of transformative growth are largely theoretical and have received relatively little empirical attention. Understanding the processes involved in PTG and SRG are important for creating effective interventions for all who experience the traumas of everyday life (Epstein, 2013).

In particular, this study focuses on two potential pathways: meaning making and engagement with the social context. Most studies of meaning making simply ask whether individuals were searching for meaning, but very few studies exist which explore in depth the processes and types of meaning made and how they relate to long-term growth. Similarly, relationships between variables such as perceived social support and well-being have been well-studied, but the mechanisms that explain how this relationship operates have not been adequately
studied (Thoits, 2011; Uchino, Bowen, Carlisle, & Birmingham, 2012). Even less is known about how the social environment may facilitate growth (Helgeson & Lopez, 2010).

Finally, this study explores the differences between growth and adjustment (cf. Staudinger & Bowen, 2010). We seek to meld lifespan developmental perspectives with those insights gained from the clinical health psychology in order to more fully explicate the roles of meaning and the social environment in differentiating between growth and adjustment.

This study examined 50 semi-structured interviews with older adults who described a difficult or challenging life event and their subsequent thoughts and behaviors. Retrospective narratives offer a valuable vantage point afforded by the passage of time. An inductive analytic approach allowed for emergent categories to take shape even though the authors were knowledgeable about the theories of resilience, PTG, SRG, and other perspective of human development. (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

The veridicality of retrospective accounts has been questioned (see Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014), however, analysis of retrospective accounts can provide unique insight into the resilience process because “resilience…takes time to unfold” (Zautra et al., 2010, p 15). This study’s potential contribution to theory building regarding the role of personal meaning and the social environment as important aspects of the resilience process was aided by the complex and nuanced descriptions that most individuals can more easily provide in retrospect.
Chapter 3

Method

The data were obtained from 50 semi-structured, single interviews conducted in 2006. A purposive sampling strategy was used because of an interest in older adults as potential exemplars of successful aging and wisdom. Participants were recruited from various university-supported volunteer registries in the Western United States. Participation was open to men and women of any ethnicity, 55 years and older who were relatively active in the community, and of any level of education. Although the intention was to purposefully recruit a sample high in attributes of wisdom, this sample is more accurately described as a convenience sample.

Sample

Participants \((N = 50)\) included 14 men and 36 women ranging in ages from 56 – 91 years \((M = 71.71; SD = 8.8)\). Nearly all were non-Hispanic Whites \((n = 49)\) and highly educated, with 16% completing some college \((n = 8)\), 16% holding a bachelor’s degree \((n = 8)\), and 68% with master’s degrees or higher \((n = 34)\). Household incomes were distributed as follows: $10,000-$29,000 \((n = 6; 12\%)\), $30,000 – $49,999 \((n = 14; 28\%)\), $50,000 - $74,999 \((n = 18; 36\%)\), $75,000 - $100,000 and above \((n = 11; 22\%)\). Just over half were married \((n = 28)\), 12 % \((n=6)\) were divorced, 30% \((n = 15)\) were widowed, and 1 had never married. At the time of the study, 62% \((n = 31)\) reported an on-going physical illness or condition and 19 (38%) reported none. Few reported functional limitations on moderate activities (e.g. moving a table or pushing a vacuum cleaner): 66% \((n = 33)\) reported no limitations, 22% \((n = 11)\) reported a few limitations, and 12% \((n = 6)\) reported many limitations (See Table 1). Overall, this group of older adults was a special sample because of their excellent health and exceptionally high education attainment. Only the household incomes of this sample approximated a normal distribution.
**Procedures**

Participants were recruited from various university-supported registries by an email inviting participation in a study about successful aging. Individuals who responded were contacted by phone to arrange a face-to-face meeting with one of two graduate student researchers to review the informed consent document and to address questions or concerns. No payment was offered for participation. Those who indicated interest in participation were given a questionnaire (Appendix A) to complete at home and a second meeting was scheduled to collect the questionnaire and conduct the interview. The questionnaire included items about basic demographics, attitude towards life, social network, spiritual/faith practices, health, wisdom, and well-being and took approximately an hour to complete.

At the second meeting, written consent was obtained following the protocol approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Questionnaires were collected and assigned an identification number. Interviews were conducted by one of two graduate research assistants who had prior work experience in conducting interviews and had undergone training sessions for this study. Both interviewers were women under 35 years old.

The interview was structured in two parts. The first portion followed the protocol established by Baltes and Staudinger (2000) where respondents were presented with two life situations and asked how they would give advice (see Appendix B). This portion of the interview was not used for the current study and has been presented elsewhere (Aldwin, Levenson, Levaro, & Taylor, 2008). The second part of the interview followed the procedure outlined by Le (2008) where participants were asked about a difficult or challenging life event and given several prompts (see Appendix B). The interviews concluded with questions about successful aging, wisdom, and a positive life event (see Appendix B).
Interviews were taped, transcribed, and assigned an ID number that matched the participant’s questionnaires. Identifying information such as contact information and the informed consent form were stored in a locked filing cabinet and thereby de-identified the survey and interview data. For this study, pseudonyms were assigned and non-consequential information changed to guard against the inadvertent identification of participants (see Table 2). Pseudonyms and ID numbers are used in the results section for readability.

All interviews were coded and used in this analysis. The first author (HI) of this study, and the principle investigator of the research project (MRL) conducted the initial coding of the interviews. The first author analyzed the initial codes, engaged in memo writing, and compared notes across the sample to create focused codes and tentative theoretical codes. During the initial coding period, weekly meetings were conducted to discuss the interviews. Issues of subjectivity regarding how the coders’ personal experiences, beliefs, and theoretical orientations could influence the analysis were integral to these discussions. Coders were at least middle-aged, of different genders, and ethnicities. Neither coder had conducted the interviews.

**Analytic Approach**

Grounded theory methods (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the perspective of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), guided the analysis of the interview data. The goal of grounded theory is to advance theory construction through an inductive, data-driven analysis of qualitative data in which the respondent’s meaning, intentions, process and actions are emphasized (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A central strength of this approach is that theory development is based on data rather than forcing interview data into preconceived categories based on extant theories.
Emergent theories begin with an inductive and iterative strategy of analysis using initial and focused coding, memo-writing, and constant comparison of data and codes. Although some of these methods are common to qualitative research, grounded theory is distinguished by an emphasis on conceptual analysis rather than thematic descriptions.

The interviews in this study focused on a difficult or challenging event in life as a way to explore the process of resilience. The perspective of constructivist grounded theory (CGT; Charmaz, 1990, 2014) is especially useful because it acknowledges the subjectivity involved with interviews and their analyses. Both participant and researcher have their own vantage point in structuring and responding to interview questions and co-construct the actual interview. For example, participants might avoid or minimize negative emotions and seek cues from the interviewer about how much to disclose (Charmaz, 2014; Lilrank, 2002; Miczo, 2003). Ideally, few questions are asked so participants are free to tell their story. Ultimately, a theoretical understanding of the topic is “created” through the process of interactions between the respondent and interviewer in data collection, and the researcher’s preconceptions, past and present perspectives, and research methods during analysis Charmaz (2014). Thus, CGT assumes “any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17).

**Steps of analysis.** Coding, memo-writing, and constant comparison between data, codes, and tentative theoretical categories are fundamental to grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The single interviews and secondary nature of this data prohibited simultaneous data collection and analysis – another hallmark of grounded theory research -- but does not preclude use of this approach (Charmaz, 2014).
Coding is pivotal to developing an emergent theory that explains the data. “By attending to careful coding, you begin weaving two major threads in the fabric of grounded theory: generalizable theoretical statements that transcend specific times and places and contextual analysis of actions and events” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). This process begins with initial coding where provisional labels or statements are made that capture meanings and actions. Fragments of the interview (i.e. words, lines, segments, or incidents) are systematically examined for conceptual rather than descriptive import, and simple, direct, and spontaneous codes are made. A sample of initial coding of an interview is provided (see Appendix C). All fifty interviews were coded and used in the analysis.

Focused coding furthers the process of theory building because these codes are created from the most substantive, conceptual, and frequent initial codes. The frequency of an initial code, however, is less important than a code that is “telling” and allows implicit meaning to be made visible (Charmaz, 2014, p. 145). Thus, similarities and differences are sought because explicating the range of experiences may enhance understanding of a process. A sample of a working copy of a spreadsheet used to organize the focused codes of social environment use is provided (see Appendix E). This involved returning to the original transcripts, reviewing initial coding summaries, and memo writing as respondent experiences were sifted and sorted into tentative categories.

Focused codes are elaborated into tentative theoretical codes or categories. Because initial and focused coding can break up the data into disconnected ideas, theoretical coding is intended to “weave[s] the fractured story back together” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). Extant theoretical codes can also be used but only when indicated in the emergent analysis and not imposed onto the data (Charmaz, 2014). The use of extant research and theory at this stage is a
contested area. Chamaz (2014) and others acknowledge the difficulties around the influence of prior personal and discipline-based knowledge in theoretical codes, and encourage the researcher to be aware of preconceptions so that the analysis is not determined by prior theory.

Memo-writing is a core method in grounded theory that assists the constant comparison essential in the emerging analysis. These notes are written from the start of coding and used to make comparisons between data and data, data and codes, codes and concepts, and entire analysis with existing literature. Memos are analytic notes that explicate and examine a researcher’s thought process and serve as records of methodological decision-making. A sample of early memo writing, which was completed during the initial coding phase, can be viewed (See Appendix D).

Descriptive statistics obtained from the questionnaires were tabulated using Stata12 (StataCorp, 2011). Initial and focused coding was managed using Dedoose Version 6.1.18 (Dedoose, 2015) and Excel.
Table 1. Sample Characteristics ($N = 50$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Women: 36 (72%), Men: 14 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>$M = 71.7$, $SD = 8.8$, Range = 56 – 91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>White: 49 (98%), Other: 1(2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>HS/Some College: 8 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelors/Credential: 8(16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Masters: 25 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctorate (PhD, JD, MD): 9 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Never married: 1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married: 28 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divorced: 6 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Widowed: 15 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>$10 – 30,000:  6 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$30 – 49,999: 14 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$50 – 74,000: 18 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$75 – 100,000+:  11 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Reported Health</td>
<td>Fair – Good: 17 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very good: 22 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excellent 11 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Health</td>
<td>Limited a lot: 6 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Health limits moderate</td>
<td>Limited a little: 11 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities)</td>
<td>Not limited at all: 33 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Vigor</td>
<td>Limited a lot: 10 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Health affect climbing</td>
<td>Limited a little: 9 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>several flights of</td>
<td>Not limited at all: 31(62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stairs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Illness/Condition Now</td>
<td>Yes: 31(62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No: 19 (38%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 2. Respondent Pseudonyms and Characteristics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age at Interview</th>
<th>Years since event</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Linda</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jim</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>ongoing</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
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<td>70</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>65</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>female</td>
</tr>
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<td>65</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>18 &amp; 5</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>female</td>
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<td>64</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>Fran</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>Tony</td>
<td>77</td>
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<td>Frank</td>
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<td>Amy</td>
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<td>Judy</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>female</td>
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<td>70</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>26 &amp;5</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
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<td>76</td>
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<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>Dorothy</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4

Results

We attempted to represent an experience that was close to the truth as experienced by our respondents. We organized their viewpoints to illustrate commonalities and distinctions in how these fifty individuals described their movement through a difficult life event using a framework of event context, resilience process, and outcomes of adjustment and growth. We reflected these personal experiences against the extant literature, and offered tentative theoretical ideas grounded in these interviews that synthesized how meaning disruption and the use of social environments influenced pathways from adversity to adjustment and growth.

To facilitate ease of reading, direct quotations are italicized and pseudonyms are used with the corresponding ID number. Table 2 lists the ID number, assigned pseudonyms, gender, approximate time since the event (when available), and age at interview. Interviews in which situational and demographic information might result in the inadvertent identification of the respondent, details were changed.

Context

When respondents were asked to describe a challenging life event, without restrictions on when this event occurred, nearly all had an immediate response that suggested the salience of such events over time. Individuals who appeared to hesitate indicated that they did not want to talk about something too negative or asked how difficult do you want? (Jim, #8). Interestingly, respondents such as Jim proceeded in sharing very difficult life events that they appeared to have in mind. We assumed that individuals chose an event that was in some way meaningful but not necessarily their most difficult or challenging life event. These retrospective accounts varied
widely and dealt with events that occurred in childhood through late life. These events were
coded into eight event types and examined by gender, current age, and most importantly, the
degree of perceived challenge to the individual’s meaning system (see Table 3). Age at the time
of event was not systematically obtained for each respondent but is presented in the analysis
when available.

**Event type.** Respondents were asked, “please reflect on a difficult or challenging
moment in your life” and “What was the moment or event?” They reported life events that were
similar to other studies of adults (Aldwin et al., 1996; Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010) and
included death of close other (i.e. spouse, parent, sibling), work or retirement conflicts, health
and safety concerns for self and others, divorce and other relationship dissolution, family
conflicts, and geographic relocation. Only one respondent identified his voluntary participation
in a leadership workshop as a challenging event. The most frequently mentioned events were
deaths of close others and work/retirement, and were divided along gender lines. Half of the
women (n= 18) provided narratives of the death of a close, significant person (i.e. spouse,
sibling, parent, relatives). Only one man shared the death of his father as his difficult life event.
In contrast, half of the men (n=7) and one woman described a difficult work/retirement situation.
Gender differences in the type of experiences identified were similar to studies in which stress at
work was associated with an increased risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD) for men but not
women (for review see Backe, Seidler, Latza, Rossnagel, & Schumann, 2012). For women with
CVD, marital stress was related to poor prognosis; however, work stress was not (Orth-Gormer
et al., 2000), suggesting a gender different in the relative salience of these life domains.

**Personal context: Disruptions of meaning.** Respondents described the degree of
shakeup an event caused in their lives as an appraisal of the severity of the event, the disruption
it caused to their worldview, or both. Neither event severity nor disruptions of meaning were questioned directly, yet nearly all respondents provided this information when asked if the event changed their outlook on life (see Table 3). We were sensitive to descriptions of how a person’s meaning of self and the world were impacted by a difficult life event. We made a distinction between event severity and meaning disruption because a person might have described an event as highly upsetting but the foundation of their reality was not disrupted, leaving their meaning system intact. For those whose assumptive worlds were challenged, restoring or coming to a new understanding of meaning was essential to recovery. Thus, initial codes were consolidated into three categories of challenge to the assumptive world: (1) little or no questioning; (2) confirmation; and (3) challenge. Within each category, however, there was a wide range of perspectives.

**Little to no questioning of meaning:** *I don’t usually belabor these things.* Initially, an interesting dichotomy emerged from those who did not state they had questioned their worldview. There were those who described how they used their intelligence, self-control, and planning to solve their problem, and those who had accepted what could not be changed. Generally, respondents who described having a sense of control and making smart choices were males who faced a work-related challenge and those who spoke of acceptance were women facing crisis such as the death or disability of a family member.

Upon closer inspection, however, the apparent dichotomy actually shared a type of clarity, or assuredness in how to proceed despite the severity of the event. When Fred (#50) learned that his wife wanted to divorce, he first made an assessment of control: *I stepped back and said, ok is there anything I can do about this right now? And I said, no there’s nothing I can do about this right now.* He mapped out his strategy to address the concrete problems of his
situation: I said ok, logically there’s a way to work through this and that’s the way I attacked the problems. I said okay what are steps one, two, and three? What are the priorities I need to worry about?

Jane (#11), too, seemed not to question her worldview when her adult daughter died: …that was the toughest thing I’ve ever had to do…. I feel sad and wish it hadn’t happened, but it’s not something that rules our life. Even though this loss was traumatic, Jane accepted what she could not change. Although Jane did not question the meaning of her daughter’s death, it cannot be assumed that she had never questioned the meaning of death. As an example, when Anne (#19) spoke of the recent death of her mother, she stated that life should be looked at very positively that you don’t dwell on things. With death, you give them an appropriate measure of grief and then you move on. She explained that her perspective about life and death was formed during a difficult period in early adulthood when her father, aunt, and close friend died unexpectedly. Those deaths served as benchmarks and influenced her view of life and death: I think I got more philosophical about learning that life has to go on that, that death is inevitable. Betty (#98) also attributed her recovery to meaning that was established earlier in life: I became a Christian in my teen years, and this has continued on so I know that I had been godly, and God-blessed and God advised. She was in her early 50s when her husband died and felt there was a plan for [her] to go on. These respondents seem to be demonstrating what Murray and Zautra (2012) described as sustainability where a sense of purpose, meaning, and goal directedness is retained during and following adversity.

Confirming the assumptive world: A moment of clarification. Respondents in this category described a specific aspect of their assumptive world that was clarified as a result their difficult life experience. Events ranged from protesting mistreatment at work, illness, death of
an adult child, and life-threatening situations and had the potential for questioning the fairness or predictability of the world. But, their sense of meaning was not questioned; rather, a specific, pre-existing value or belief was brought into focus. Susan (#36) spoke about the sudden death of her adult daughter as horrible...and so sad. Susan did not question why a mother of four should die so young but instead stated that her daughter’s death *just reinforced that you don’t know how much time you have... and if there are things you want to do or, you know, better do ‘em right away if you can.* When faced with emergency surgery, Barbara (#23), explained she *would not be a hypocrite* by accepting the last rites of a religion she had rejected. At the time, Barbara was a young adult and had been afraid to tell her family she had left the church but in this moment she *really had to take a stand.* She described a *moment of absolute clarity* where she sent away the priest and acted on her belief that she could be *absolutely accepting of whatever would happen - If I’m dying, so be it.*

**Challenging the assumptive world: It made me reflect back onto myself.** A majority of respondents described challenges to their sense of competence and identity, feelings of safety and predictability, and understanding of their world. These themes, inductively derived, are consistent with Janoff-Bulman’s (2004) observation that when fundamental assumptions are disrupted by life events, a person often questions their sense of self, sense of meaning, and understanding about how the world operates. Narratives were coded with a single domain of meaning disruption; however, it is understood that a single event could have disturbances of meaning across themes of self, predictability, and worldview. There were also variations in the degree of disruption. For some respondents, aspects of the assumptive world were shaken and for others it was shattered.
Questioning one’s sense of self: I always felt that I could manage things. Disruptions to a person’s sense of self involved two related issues: (1) questions of competence and capabilities, and (2) questions of identity (i.e. what it means to be me). Several women were surprised at their inability to deal with the death of their spouse because of their usual high level of autonomy and competence. Karen (#12) described coming unglued for three years after the unexpected death of her husband. She explained that she was not as self-reliant as she had thought:

I’ve always thought of myself you know... of being very self sufficient, I could take care of anything. I handled the money in the family...you know I can do this. But I didn’t realize that I depended almost entirely on him for my emotional support.

Similarly, Jill (# 59) was taken aback by her unanticipated struggle: That was a very humbling kind of lesson to learn, cause I always felt that I could manage things, and it was just very hard to manage grieving. Mary (#16) explained that she had thought [she] was quite composed and quite mature so she was surprised by her depression and loneliness following her husband’s death. For each of these respondents, the loss of a loved one was compounded by the loss of feeling capable. The experience of discordance between pre-event and post-event levels of competence shook up their sense of self, and in doing so, created a void in how to proceed.

In situations in which respondents were emotionally vulnerable but not disabled by the event, difficult life situations seemed to challenge the status quo of identity. Sam (#31) recalled his failure to pass a professional examination as the most disruptive moment up to that point in life and he struggled to find or regain some feeling of self worth. He recalled: ... it was a thoroughly humbling experience and, but it also was a good kick in the backside to get to work and not to think I was so great. Similarly, John (#2) described that he used to be a cocky son of a bitch. But after the death of his father, John aspired to be more like his father in his compassion,
humility, and tolerance, so he began to consider important decisions by asking, what would [my father] do?

Following the death of her husband, Fran (#24) explained that instead of spending my life as Mrs. Dr. Johnson, I became Fran Johnson in my own right. Transitions in identity were described as if a new and preferred way of being was revealed, acted upon, and eclipsed the former sense of self. Ruth (#38) called this her age of realization:

I wanted to kill myself. I was very unhappy and I just didn’t want to go on living . . . I’m sure I was 8 or 9 years old and I call it the age of realization. That was my age of realization . . . that I didn’t have to be passive, that I could make the decisions and I could go forward. And I think that was probably the most traumatic times of my life . . . I can’t tell you all the thoughts that I had . . . I just felt that’s it. I only have one life, I’m going to live the life I want to live . . . And my goal was to get to 16 so that I could leave home.

Are such realization concepts that are present, yet hidden to the respondent, thus similar to those who had a moment of clarification that was articulated in an intense situation? Or, is there an important distinction between what is known about the assumptive world and that which is experienced as new information?

**Questioning the predictability of life:** *Everything took an abrupt turn.* Difficult events frequently challenged the assumption that life was safe, predictable, and under a person’s control to remedy. These situations were experienced with shock and disbelief, and violated a sense of the world as a safe place that was under a person’s control. The events that prompted these responses included work issues, illness and death of loved ones, injury to others, danger to self and others, and divorce.

Sarah (#54) described the loss of both her father and husband within weeks as so drastic and fast that even she was tested despite being born with happy genes. A rapid and unexpected unfolding of events was common to the experiences of those who felt their sense of control and
predictability had been lost. The unanticipated nature of events also contributed to Tom’s (#57) distress. He was unexpectedly pressured to retire with little recourse: *It was a major change, unexpected, and unwanted… in the domain of not being in control.* Similarly, even in late life, Dorothy had not considered a life without her husband, so when he died, she was *just in so much shock, and it went on for quite some time…a state of shock for months.* If event type is characterized by the perception of an unanticipated and unwanted rather than a specific event, then these examples support Helgeson and Lopez’s (2010) observation that the type of difficult life event is related to the type of meaning that is disrupted.

Some situations were unanticipated and unimagined because they were outside of a person’s experience. When Amy’s (#41) sister disclosed that her cousin had molested her as a child, it took Amy for a real loop: *It messed up my life for a while, yeah. Like, I’m not ready for this!* What began as a disruption to her personal sense of predictability grew into a more global violation of safety as she researched the prevalence of abuse:

*For probably somewhere between 3 and 6 months I had just an awful time just being around men, men that I had known and interacted with for years. You know, just sort of every time I would see a man I would just think, “Well, who have you molested lately?”*

For others, situations were unanticipated and unimagined because they were not part of a person’s belief system. Carol (#37) valued the traditional family in a *deep seated* way so when her husband wanted to divorce it shattered her expectations that she could have a life of *valuing family* in the way she imagined. Edith (#43) also faced a divorce that she did not want and struggled with the idea that she had *no control* over the situation: *It always feels you should have more control or something to do about a relationship which you enjoyed.* Facing the limitations of what can be controlled was especially difficult to accept for individuals such as Sally (#62)
who saw herself as a fixer and a controller. Her sister was dying of cancer and Sally struggled with the limits of her influence to alter the course of the disease: I did everything I could possibly do in the way of advising her, talking to her, and helping her and it was one of those things you can’t get rid of it.

**Challenging an understanding of the world: Lost my faith in God.** These accounts involved a disruption to a person’s sense of how the world operates. There is overlap with the previous categories of challenges to a sense of self and the predictability of life; however, these respondents were explicit in what they questioned about their previous beliefs that had been fundamental to their understanding of their world. This group consists of a small number of respondents like Janet (#40) who loses her faith in a healing and loving God. When her husband was told he needed to stop treatments for his cancer, she questioned her faith.

*I had always been a pretty religious person and I always read that God will heal, God will help, and I knew what a wonderful person he (husband) was. It was very difficult to give him up and to have lost my faith in God, cause I lost it completely cause I didn’t believe that there was such a thing as a just God… but who is this God that we talk about and where is the justification in this God who heals?*

Without her belief in God, Janet felt very alone despite the presence of supportive family and friends. Fundamental beliefs are the core of how meaning of life is understood and achieved. This level of severity of disruption is more similar to Janoff-Bulman’s (2004) description of a “shattered” assumptive world where a void is created by Janet’s lost faith.

For Gary (# 15), work was everything and he never ate lunches, wouldn’t get home until 8 or 9 at night. When he was hospitalized after an emotional and physical collapse, Gary began to question the doom and gloom world he had created where he took himself so God damned seriously and criticized others for not doing the same: I’d get upset with people that would take vacations, the women that would take hair appointments.
Summary. The context sets the stage for the resilience process. For those who did not have their meaning systems shaken, in spite of the severity of the event, the next step was often an approach that was readily at hand. But for the majority of our respondents, some level of questioning was prompted by a life event that created a disturbance in meaning: I’m not who I thought I was, I didn’t think that would happen, I didn’t know that could happen, and I no longer believe that. How a person moves from a shaken or shattered assumptive world is at the heart of the resilience process.

Resilience Processes and the Social Environment

Respondents were asked how they coped with or resolved their difficult life event (see Appendix B). Although the social aspect of coping was not questioned directly, all interviews included spontaneous statements of how their resilience process involved other people. This emergence of the social environment as a central theme should not be surprising given Luthar’s (2000) conclusions that resilience in children depends upon relationships; however, its prominence and variety was unanticipated. Consequently, our analysis explored aspects of social support beyond the commonly used categories of received or perceived support, and instead examined how individuals navigated and negotiated their social environments to resolve particular tensions.

Narratives were coded according to the respondent’s descriptions of their most central use, or impactful experience with their social environment. In other words, these codes described what the respondent sought from their social environment and the function with which the respondent experienced the social environment. Consolidation of initial coding resulted in nine categories of respondents and their social environments: (1) enlisting help; (2) seeking expert advice; (3) rallying around; (4) seeking similar others; (5) making new connections; (6)
being held and holding; (7) contrasting self with others; (8) receiving unsolicited support; and (9) learning from society at large. Although some individuals described experiences with several categories over time, we were unable to systematically analyze this temporal aspect because it was not questioned directly (e.g. how did your use of your social world change over time?). As a simple example, what began for Beth (#33) as dyadic support between spouses (being held and holding), shifted to disclosure to larger network of friends that prompted support throughout her husband’s cancer treatment. Beth’s narrative was coded as “rallying around” because she spoke at length about the support of others. The resilience process is dynamic thus we must be aware that an individual’s perceptions and needs changed over time.

**Enlisting help: I need you to be a cosigner.** Individuals in this category sought assistance from their existing social network for help with a specific problem. After Frank (#30) lost his job, he called his friends at the company he wanted to work for: *I talked to one of them quite a bit and then I must have spent at least 60 hours learning everything I could about* their primary product. He ultimately met his objective, as did all others in this group, who possessed high mastery and social capital.

Immediately following the separation from his wife, Fred (#50) called a relative with a clear plan: *I’ve got a problem here. I need you to be a cosigner on a loan for me so I can at least make it through the next month financially, so he did that and I just, I just did that.*

This category is most similar to instrumental social support where network members perform concrete actions (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House & Kahn, 1985). Thoits (2011) would describe this category as “active coping assistance” and would emphasize the importance of the sources of that support (p. 152). In this category, respondents requested assistance from primary group members (family, relatives, and friends with emotional ties) as well as secondary group
Thoits defines secondary group members as those for whom the relationship is more formal, less personal, and at the discretion of each party as in work or organization relationships (2011, p. 146). For example, Jim’s (#8) enlisted the aid of secondary group members to avoid being terminated from his job: *I was involved with a lot of different people, and I talked to some of them. It wasn’t anything I did that solved it.*

**Seeking expert advice: He gave us good advice.** Individuals in this category turned to trained experts for specific information to help navigate their challenging situations. These experts were generally professionals who were not in the respondent’s proximal social network. Guidance was provided in specialized areas such as psychiatry, neurology, leadership training, mental health, and social issues, however, there were distinctions in how these experts were used. When Amy (#41) learned about her sister’s sexual abuse she recognized she knew little about the topic:

*I’m a scientist so the first thing is get more information. So I got a hold of one of the nurse practitioners there who I know deals with that and said, “Get me what information you can. I need to understand more about this.”*

Amy needed objective facts from an uninvolved expert before she could address the emotional aspects of her sister’s abuse, possibly to regain a sense of stability after being thrown *for a loop* by her sister’s disclosure.

For others, expert knowledge was essential for a healthy recovery. Gary (#15) was given an emergency appointment with a psychiatrist when his physical and emotional symptoms spiraled downward: *We talked for a few minutes and he said “well how’d you like to spend a couple of days in the hospital?” I just lost it. It sounded so good.* This evaluation was Gary’s turning point in learning about self-care.
In the social support literature, this category is consistent with informational support where guidance and advice is obtained (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House & Kahn, 1985). Similar to those who enlisted aid, seeking expert information was a process that reflected an ability to locate useful and available resources – a demonstration of social capital and mastery. Seeking expert information can also be seen as a way of increasing mastery through cracking the code of how something is done.

**Rallying around:** *We had the most wonderful friends – they’d do anything for you.*

Social networks rallied around individuals to help them take care of daily tasks and offer emotional support. Linda (#4) recalled how their friends took care of many daily tasks when their son was hospitalized. They cleaned and brought food without being asked: *Every time I needed food, it was there, this whole length of time.* Leslie (#56) recalled the outpouring of support after she was robbed at gunpoint: *…friends helped me through my aftershock, my own trauma. [I was] grateful for the support that we had, and grateful for the understanding, and grateful for the community.* Unsolicited emotional support and tangible assistance from friends, family, and sometimes strangers, was a unique experience that could leave a lasting impression.

Melanie experienced strong emotions when groups of people from the community stepped forward to help her family after a fire destroyed their home:

> *We had to rely tremendously on the love and support of our friends in this community to survive, for one, and then to recover... it made me see into the hearts of other people - to see their generosity, their love, their kindness.*

This type of unsolicited and unconditional support was also a profound experience for Jill (#59). After her husband’s death she found it very hard to rejoin life. She was invited to dinner by a co-worker and really didn’t hardly talk to anybody that evening or for an entire year, but they never gave up on me.
Inviting me to movies, to come to dinner, to come to their homes for dinner. And it wasn’t just, cause a lot of people did that, these people were in it for the long haul, and I think that was the most wonderful experience that I have had with people.

These types of emotional and instrumental support can create what Janoff-Bulman refers to as a “holding environment” where the “necessary cognitive-emotional work” can occur (1992, p. 146). Acceptance and understanding also offers “emotional sustenance,” and in Jill’s case this was even more poignant because she felt she had offered so little to this group of new friends (Thoits, 2011, p. 153).

Seeking similar others: I’ve compared notes with other people. Respondents sometimes sought out others who had experienced a similar life event. Sarah (#54) explained that even though she had lots of support from friends and family, one of the things [she] decided to do as an individual was join a grief support group. Although she had never been one for that kind of group she joined.

Everybody had lost a really significant person in their life and many of them had lost a spouse . . . I think I learned a lot of strategies there, and I kind of came to grips with a lot of stuff, so that ended up being a really good thing for me to do.

In the group, Sarah found common ground with “experientially similar others” who were also dealing with loss (Thoits, 2011). Because of commonalities in life experiences, similar others are often able to provide emotional support and information that is more relevant than inexperienced others. The affiliation with similar other also signaled a shift in identity where respondents now consider themselves to be group insiders (e.g. being a widow). The experience of loss shared by support group members might also pave the way for mutual acceptance.

For Dorothy (#99), her participation in a Hospice course on grief grew into friendships that expanded her social circle:
And at the end of the eight weeks they have a little potluck dinner, and people that have gone before come to the potluck...they invited me to join an ongoing grief group that meets twice a month. It was a lifesaver. And through this group I made these wonderful friends. And so I have just all kinds of friends... I just keep multiplying friends.

Dorothy was grateful for her diverse friends who had given [her] avenues to think about different things, perhaps something unexpected in late-late life.

**Making new connections: We met lots of wonderful people through it.** New relationships sometimes emerged from seeking solutions for problems created by the difficult life event. These efforts were focused on solving a problem, rather than seeking connections to similar others as in the previous category; However, meaningful relationships were unexpectedly created as a result of this problem solving process.

When Dolly (#39) realized that her community lacked resources for her son who was born with developmental disabilities, she and her husband took it as a challenge to reach out and do it for other people as well as their son. They worked to connect families and professionals and eventually founded an agency that provided services to those with developmental disabilities.

*We got involved in a whole other phase that we wouldn’t have thought of had we not had our own challenge and we met lots of wonderful people through it, lots of fine professionals over the years.*

After the death of Fran’s (#24) husband, she went to work in order to support her family of four children. Her supervisor was a woman whom Fran considered to be an exemplar of wisdom because she was *capable…compassionate, and wonderful to work with.* Her supervisor had problems at home yet *she never took those problems to work* and made the workplace *such a pleasant place to be.* Fran had the good fortune of having a supervisor who was *very capable in her own right* and could mentor Fran’s transition from *Mrs. Dr. Smith* to *Fran Smith.* These
unexpected relationships were forged in dealing with day-to-day tasks and contributed to a sense of purpose and mastery.

**Being held and holding:** *For two days we had nothing to do but talk to each other.*

This category involves mutual support for a challenging life event that is shared with a close friend or family member. Although an event is unlikely to be experienced by different individuals in exactly the same manner, these respondents described their shared emotions with a close other. In the narratives, those moments of emotional expression and mutual support still carried great importance.

Beth (#33) was teary as she recalled how she and her husband *just clung to each other and just cried, prayed about it, and somehow we got through the night.* After the strong emotions, she explained that, *at a certain point you sort of get a hold of yourself, the light bulb kind of goes off, this is where we are, and so you start making plans.* Similarly, when John’s (#2) father died, he got drunk and called a friend whom he had known since the first grade.

*We were like brothers. And I said, “I’m drunk, I don’t dare drive home, and I don’t know how to handle this” . . . He was there within an hour, and we sat up all night . . . My friend loved him like a father. I think we cried all night most of the time.*

After they had sobered up, John said *Hell, I’ve got a job. I’ve got to get back to work,* and he put his grief aside for the moment yet would *think about it... You deal with it.*

Following a life-threatening situation, Kathy (#52) described the aftermath of a climbing accident that took the lives of 3 others:

*It was sad. It was a tragedy. We were sort of contained . . . in that area for two days when we had nothing to do but to talk to each other about the event and that I think that helped a lot. I went with five women friends . . . and you know we’ve since talked about it and it feels that we really talked so much about it in those two days that even though it replayed in our minds for several months afterwards,*
none of us had bad dreams or anything like that. No post traumatic stress or any long-term effects.

These narratives share a pattern where intense emotions were shared with close others, followed by an ability to deal with the life event as a part of one’s life.

**Contrasting self with others:** *My wife and I deal with things quite a bit differently.*

Difficult life events created opportunities for respondents to recognize and address important differences between themselves and close others. The relationship history between respondents and family members likely created unique situations for insight. When their son was in an auto accident Steven (#53) discovered that he and his wife deal with things quite a bit differently.

Steven contrasted his denial of their son’s condition with his wife’s problem-focused response:

> She was immediately remodeling our house to accommodate, you know, a paraplegic. I was in total denial and just, everything’s going to be fine. I’m going to work, and I just didn’t want to focus on anything.

His wife’s pragmatism and readiness to approach this situation made it difficult for Steven to put [his] head in the sand and ignore reality. Although it was a challenge, he began to understand that he needed to face these things...to come to the reality and be able to talk about it.

Conflicting viewpoints with close others also created opportunities of clarity during difficult moments. Barbara’s (#23) avoided discussing her religious beliefs with her family, but her medical emergency brought this to the surface:

> And they were both hysterical...they said, she’s got to come back to the church, blah, blah, blah. So they ran around and got a priest in to see me and so this priest came hustling in to give me the last rites.

When Barbara sent the priest away without performing the last rites, her religious views were made clear to her family and herself. It felt more like something had opened, and it was a life changing moment. I felt really calm. I felt really accepting for whatever was to be. Barbara’s
clarity might have also paved the way to preserve her valued family ties despite their religious differences.

**Receiving unsolicited support: My mother came and never went home.** Respondents sometimes received unsolicited support from their social network that was not always welcomed. After the death of her husband, Jill (#59) got rid of all negative people in her life: *People that really liked to tell me how sad I must be and practically reduced me to tears.* Rather than feeling supported by these attempts at sympathy, Jill bristled when hearing these statements.

Another example of a poor fit between provisions of social support and the recipient’s needs was Linda’s (#4) description of her mother’s constant presence and conversation: *She was always there and always, you know, and yak, yak, yak, yak, yak.* She knew that her mother was very well-meaning but all Linda wanted was peace and quiet. Unable or unwilling to ask her mother to be quiet or to leave, Linda would seek out secluded locations in the hospital for solitude.

Recipients in this category seemed to find it difficult to ask for what they needed, and likewise, their network members were not quick to disclose their intentions. Edith (#43) didn’t realize for nearly 15 years that her son had intervened on her behalf when she was floundering after her divorce:

*He was just really adamant about getting into this business situation together . . . he was trying to get me out of town and get me on to something, you know, that would involve me in something I liked to do and something that would keep me busy and things . . . he knew instinctively that I was really having a hard time and he wanted to get me out of Dodge.*

Unsolicited interventions by family members occurred with respondents who were having difficulty. Karen (#12) admitted that after her husband’s death she went from feeling
competent to overwhelmed. She refused to make financial decision and demanded that everything be left alone:

*I just sort of came unglued. And this went on for I think about 3 years before I got to the point where I could stop and really consider this and that and get back to doing some of the things I should do.*

Karen’s mother stepped in, and came to live with her, *and never went home.* Her assessment was that Karen was *not fit to be left alone.* Although Karen eventually recovered, she continued to question why she had not been able to go about her business but instead *just said.* ‘*Forget it!*’ It is not clear from the interview whether this level of unsolicited intervention reinforced Karen’s lack of confidence in her abilities, and consequently, created a more lasting identity as a person who could not handle her grief.

**Learning from society at large: The whole feminist movement was happening.** This category emerged from respondents that identified a specific aspect of the sociocultural environment that was critical to their resilience process. This category is distinct from other informational supports such as “seeking expert advice” which was a targeted inquiry with professionals. Generally, all resilience processes are influenced by their sociocultural worlds (i.e. availability of hospice, support groups); however, this category captures a respondent’s identification of their resilience process at the societal and cultural level.

Gloria (#96) explains that she *grew up in an era when women were, oh, helpmate. Even if they were professionals, they were the little woman. The wife.* At the time when her husband wanted a divorce, she still considered herself *as a stay at home mom who was basically responsible for meals and baths and homework.*
When her personal world was shaken by the divorce, she was supported by the spirit of the times:

> And I think that I was going through all the changes for myself, kind of when the whole feminist movement was happening, and so I think because of my own personal experiences, and in kind of tuning into what Betty Freidan and other people were talking about, it just made me really aware that individuals are important as individuals . . . It changed what I was doing for a living because what had been a hobby became a business.

This level of influence occurs through exposure to television, the internet, and books as a few examples. For Jill (#59), a particular book by Joan Didion (2005) resonated with her experience:

> Of all the things that I read after my husband died, I never read anything about magical thinking, but I felt it. For example, [Didion] wouldn’t give away his shoes because then he wouldn’t come back if she didn’t have his shoes. I kept my husband’s boots because they were given to him by the whole family one year, many years ago, and he was so sentimental about them.

This particular category provides clear examples of the transactions that occur between an individual and their social environment during the resilience process. In this case, the social environment is a rich and diverse collection of ideas, social movements, and perspectives.

**Summary.** This is a nuanced analysis of how the social environment was used to cope with a difficult life event. Some of the codes share common ground with definitions of social support such as the receipt of emotional, informational, or practical assistance from significant others (Nurullah, 2012; Thoits, 2011). However, these codes go beyond the generic categories of received, perceived, and provided social support and encourage consideration of how individuals navigate and negotiate their social environment to meet their needs after adversity. Navigation and negotiation suggest that individuals are interacting with their social environment in ways that lead to contemplation, or thoughts about what is occurring. In other words, the social
environment can function to encourage a person to become aware of how they are connecting with others, broadening their understanding of the world, and envisioning their future.

**Finding Meaning through the Social Environment**

How is disrupted meaning restored? Restoration of meaning is not simply a return to former ways of seeing oneself in the world but assumes change. Rebuilding the assumptive world involves internal processes (i.e. cognitive processing) that rely on the external world and a person’s interactions with others (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). Social environments can facilitate this through exposure to new ideas, relationships, and through experiences that enhance self-knowledge, awareness of connectedness, and trust in navigating the world.

In this section, we analyzed how a person’s social ecology contributed to the respondent’s meaning post-event. This analysis was organized by meaning finding categories, and then by categories of social environment use that were identified in the previous section. Of those who described a disruption to their assumptive worlds, four categories of meaning-finding were inductively identified: (1) Accepting complexity; (2) Experiencing compassion through connections with others; (3) Knowing oneself; and (4) Being comfortable with uncertainty. The data for this analysis was primarily in response to the following prompts: (1) *Did the difficult life experience change you in any way?*; (2) *Did you learn anything from the experience?*; and (3) *Would you say that this experience made you wiser?* (see Appendix B). For each meaning finding category we included all forms of social environment use that a respondent mentioned in order to give a more complete picture of how different aspects of a person’s social ecology facilitated meaning finding over time.

**Accepting complexity: There’s a lot of gray out there.** For respondents in this category, their meaning-finding involved an understanding that life is complex and is often a mixture of
good and bad. Accepting complexity also meant that things were not always what they first seemed to be. How does a person’s social ecology assist with the development of this perspective? For those in this category, it began with reaching out to others and sharing their confusion. Robert (#10) spoke of a painful estrangement from his adult daughter following her accusation of prior abuse. Robert had brief interactions with mental health counselors and spoke of a book that was popular at that time that criticized the practice of recovered memories of abuse. But what seemed most important was how he and his wife supported each other (i.e. held and holding) as they looked deep within themselves to see if there was anything they recalled. Their mutual support likely helped Robert to feel safe to examine the past and to speak openly about this subject, thus enabling him to maintain loving relationships with his wife and their other children: So there is that one heavy sadness in our lives. Everything else is quite good, but that sadness. Robert experienced both the love of his family and the painful loss of his daughter. Robert explained that he used to believe that things in life could be understood as either all good or all bad . . . a black and white world. But over time, the world has certainly become much less black and white . . . just a lot of gray out there.

An acceptance of complexity represents a broader understanding about how the world works in contrast to more limited judgments of good and bad. Amy (#41) turned to a medical professional (seeking expert advice) to learn about the family sexual abuse after her sister’s disclosure of abuse by an uncle. The prevalence of abuse overwhelmed Amy but through her efforts to understand, she expanded her knowledge of human behavior that helped Amy to go beyond her old thoughts of blaming her sister:
I think it’s made me a little slower to judge people because always, you know, we just called her crazy Sally. Most of my adult life she’s just been crazy Sally . . . I think now I’m a lot more aware . . . in understanding what happened it’s much easier for me to accept it . . . When people do things that I just think are totally off the wall, I still think they’re off the wall but in the back of my mind I’m always saying, “Well, what’s happened to them . . . that’s made that seem like a good choice to them?”

After nearly a year and with talking with a couple of good friends, Amy revised her understanding of the world that helped her to feel compassion rather than judgment towards her sister and others.

**Experiencing compassion through connections with others: It made me see into the hearts of other people.** At the time of their challenging life event, individuals in this category described themselves as achievement oriented, competent, busy, independent, and at times, critical and judgmental of others. These confident individuals believed they had a successful approach to life. But the life events shared by these respondents rocked their foundations: Gary (#15) experienced a physical and emotional collapse; Melanie (#51) was humbled by her simple error that resulted in a tragic house fire; and Mary (#16) couldn’t believe that she was struggling with loneliness. When an unanticipated event placed them at their most vulnerable, they were embraced without judgment by a wide variety of people in their social ecology: family, co-workers, medical professionals, close friends, experientially specific others, acquaintances, and even strangers. Through this experience, they saw themselves, maybe for the first time, as having the same vulnerabilities as others. Epstein (2013) writes how through our suffering, we understand our relationships to others – what we hold in common.

Gary (#15) described himself as a workaholic who used to criticize others because they took time off of work to vacation, and later became a man that better understood what life was really about. When Gary suffered a physical and emotional collapse, he received professional
help with the support of his wife and supervisor. When he returned to work he was greeted with support rather than disapproval: *It was interesting as I came out of that experience how many people would come up and say, “You know, I had that happen to me.”* Gary also found he was able to help others by sharing his experience: *Most people won’t…and I’m happy to share it. They wanted to know the symptoms because they know they’re right on the edge.* Similarly, Melanie (#51) was once proud of her ability to lead a busy life but acknowledged:

> The fire was caused by juggling too many events, and too many things at the same time. I learned from that mistake...to be able to only take on as much as you can actually do rather than as much as you want to do or think you need to do.

Melanie’s family, neighbors, and strangers rallied around and helped her family to resettle. Because she blamed herself for the fire, Melanie experienced gratitude in the presence of her community’s acts of compassion: *It made me see into the hearts of other people; To see their generosity, their love, their kindness.* She also says she learned humility and humbleness through this experience and to *not to be judgmental about other people because you really never know when something like that is going to happen to you... I’m more tolerant.* Melanie’s receipt of compassionate care facilitated a shift in her perspective that in tragedy there was little that separated people.

Evidence of this connection that we share with others is present yet easy to overlook. Before the death of her husband, Mary (#16) was focused just on her life around her: *I was pretty independent and busy with my family, and I didn’t invite people over a lot. I’d always been able to take care of myself.* In fact, she *never looked upon a widow as being that lonesome and that needy until [she] was one.* This shift from outsider to empathic insider was further facilitated by her participation in a support group:
I looked at all single people, the men as well as the women, who are in tears and crying . . . now all of a sudden I started looking outward and saying they need it. So just about anybody I know that has lost a spouse or a child, I reach out to. I learned more compassion, more understanding, that people need, everyone needs friends all the time. I know I’m much more compassionate with other people who have a loss from death. I hope I’m more compassionate with any kind of loss.

Mary’s meaning finding was evidenced in new activities that brought people together: *I started a singles dinner group, and things like that.*

It is interesting to note that respondents in this category shared a pre-event worldview of confidence and independence similar to the respondents who enlisted the aid of others to solve a problem that did not disrupt their sense of meaning. In the case of the latter individuals, seeking the help of others confirmed their confidence in being able to handle their problems, and thus maintained their assumptive world. This suggests that for those who believe they had life under control, a big enough shakeup may be necessary to wake a person into recognizing their connectedness to others, and develop compassion towards others and even one’s self. Dorothy (#99) articulates this experience:

*It awakened senses that I’d never . . . I didn’t even know I had. I never thought about it before. There was no reason. I suppose when you don’t experience a lot of things, there are certain senses we don’t even use. It certainly made me more attuned to other people’s feelings. It really did. It made me less critical of people.*

Experiencing compassion towards self and others is also facilitated by greater self-knowledge and is described by those in the next meaning finding category.

**Knowing oneself: It made me very introspective.** This category of meaning finding is about coming to know oneself. Meaning finding of this nature was generally triggered by an actual or potential loss of relationships through death, divorce, or discord. These close social ties were central to the respondents’ sense of meaning and purpose, thus once disrupted, most engaged in forms of introspection that they previously had not done. Given that the majority of
respondents in this study described situations of relationship loss, it makes sense that most
respondents described meaning finding that involved a sense of self.

Important relationships serve as sources of information about who we are and identity
can be disrupted by a loss. This shakeup can be a catalyst for self-exploration that is supported
by the social ecology. Dorothy (#99), our oldest respondent shared her process following the
death of her husband when she was in her mid-80s. She joined a grief support group, met many
other people, enjoyed new friendships, and even started line dancing. This period of reaching
out to her external world was also accompanied by self-examination:

I had a lot of time to spend thinking deeply about things, about what I believed,
and so forth . . . Trying to figure out what my emotions are. What did I believe?
Did I really believe things, or was it just something that . . . I was taught as a
child and you just evolve thinking this, and you never really think about it deeply.

Perhaps for the first time in her life Dorothy began to think independently: *See when you’re all
alone, I had to start thinking for myself.* As a child she simply accepted what she was told.
While she was married she trusted her husband to think for them on many issues and *never
argued.* Now, she realized that she was someone *who like[d] to know about things:*

I look at things more deeply now. From watching the news, or anything like that. I
don’t just believe what I hear. I really think about it. I think no, that’s not right, or
I agree with this, or that is not right. This sort of thing . . . I found I didn’t agree
with a lot of things that he used to agree with. Sometimes I feel a little disloyal at
having those thoughts, but I’m over it now.

Losing her role as a wife and all its implicit rules gave Dorothy a chance to explore new qualities
of herself, aided by her friendships: *They’ve opened my brain.* Similarly, Fran (#24) saw how
she *developed as [her] own person* after the death of her husband. Instead of *doing these social
and the superficial things* that were expected of a physician’s wife, Fran established an
independent identity: *I had to dig in and really live my own life . . . And all these years since I*
have been my own person and that is a very positive thing. Fran credits her supervisor at work for modeling this new way of being, and was pleased that she could pass on the importance of an independent sense of self to her daughters: They’re all career women . . . they’re all married...they’re all taking care of themselves.

Gloria’s (#96) divorce was unexpected and unwanted. She struggled emotionally over the loss of her marriage and its impact on her self concept of seeing [her]self as a stay at home mom. Until then she had not thought about herself beyond a wife and mother. Gloria had in place a pretty good emotional support system from women friends and from some men friends who openly shared their affection for her: we like you because you’re you. This safe harbor of support seems essential to expanding oneself during a time of vulnerability. It is also important to be exposed to new ways of seeing the world as Gloria was by the feminist movement where explicit information provided an alternative to her prior sense of identity:

It changed my outlook about myself in terms of what kind of a person I was. I got a lot more confident in my ability to sort of take care of things. I did my own car repair. I took my kids on a cross-country trip. I did a lot of stuff that I would not have thought was possible. So I think I came out of that a . . . happier person, which couldn’t have seemed possible at the time.

Nearly all respondents who deepened their self-understanding did so in response to an unexpected and unwanted life event. However, one respondent elected to attend a weeklong leadership workshop that changed the way he saw himself. Jack (#49) attended a program similar to Outward Bound or the National Outdoor Leadership School where challenging individuals out of their comfort zones and into extreme environments facilitate personal growth. Jack does not explicitly state that he was searching for a challenge in life, but it could be assumed that his decision to invest in a weeklong retreat was motivated by an interest in a new experience.
I changed a lot of my attitudes as a result of that. It made some definite changes in my feelings about myself. I was never particularly self-confident. I didn’t do well in school, didn’t have any close contacts. Uh, it’s changed everything. It really did. I developed self-confidence in there.

This type of experience may be a unique resource in societies that lack rites of passage or other formal challenges that mark important life transitions. Jack’s newfound sense of self emboldened him to make changes: I decided I didn’t want to do again what I had done for the previous . . . 20 years . . . So I went back to school. He became a teacher who was later honored by a student who felt he was one of the most influential people in her life. Jack summed up his life by saying, I’m very comfortable with me.

**Being comfortable with uncertainty: I felt really accepting for whatever was to be.**

Learning to accept and embrace uncertainty in life was the meaning found by respondents in this category. This meaning involved both letting go of the belief that life could be controlled as well as engaging in the present. The life events in this category involved serious illness and death. Other studies have found that a greater appreciation for life was a common outcome following life-threatening situations (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). For respondents in this study, their meaning finding went beyond an appreciation of life because they learned they could live fully life with uncertainty. Through their resilience process, these respondents came to accept that uncertainty of the future was the only thing that could be counted on. How the social environment facilitated learning to live fully and with uncertainty was less clear in these narratives. Perhaps coming to this meaning is experienced as a more internal, cognitive process consequently respondents tended to share their insights rather than the influences of their outer world. However, for one respondent, she was explicit in her descriptions of the influence of her social ecology, so we begin with her.
Sally (#32) struggled to accept the limitations of what she could do to save her terminally ill brother: *I’m a fixer and I’m a controller and this could not be fixed or controlled.* The loss of her brother and her limitations to control life motivated her to search for new ways to deal with this challenge. She learned to meditate and joined a loss support group where she was introduced to processing her thoughts through journaling – practices she had continued. Sally credits her meditation practice in facilitating her ability to *just accepting about, well everything in life. I used to worry like crazy about everything. And I think that was the beginning of me not worrying about everything, you know.* Instead, she learned that she could *allow things to happen.* Faced with death of a loved one for the first time was also *the beginning of [her] realization of how precious life was . . . life is so ephemeral . . . so you just grab it and live it.*

The unexpected deaths of Sarah’s (#54) husband and father got her in touch with *[her] own mortality.* Sarah succinctly described living fully with uncertainty: *You realize that you got to make the most of everyday because nobody knows.* She recalled how some members of her grief support group *wouldn’t let go of stuff* and explained: *I couldn’t do that, you know, you can’t breathe then.* It was not clear how influential the support group member’s perseverating was in helping Sarah to form her current perspective. Nevertheless, Sarah explained that the unexpected losses helped her to broaden her understanding: *I’m pretty open to whatever life unfolds now . . . I’d just rather give it up to the universe now.* Accepting uncertainty has opened her to each moment: *Find joy everyday, in little stuff. I find it very joyful that I have all these flowers sitting in my back porch for me to plant.*

Sarah’s (#54) observations of support group members who could not accept their losses hints at how contrasting viewpoints from a person’s social ecology can be influential. Seeing how we are similar to, and different from, others can feel like instantaneous insight. In a life
threatening medical situation, Barbara (#23) affirmed her position as a non-Catholic amongst her devoutly Catholic family. Barbara had faced several intertwining issues: her religious beliefs, her independent identity, and her mortality: *I knew I was dying.* Should she accept the last rites of a faith she no longer believed in order to *please* and *keep the peace* with her mother? She recalled *a moment of clarification* where she *felt really calm…absolutely not afraid* and was able to *trust that whatever happens.* In this moment of crisis she followed her own *inner truth* and *just let go of any control.* Barbara explains that this acceptance of uncertainty has been a touchstone during difficult times in her life:

> Because that was kind of a real moment of transition for me, all the other times of transitions when a relationship breaks up, when a marriage falls apart or whatever...I would always go back to that moment of transition and think, “Gee, I just have to be really accepting here of whatever is to happen.”

**Summary.** Several interesting observations resulted from an inductive coding of meaning found by respondents. First, each meaning category was facilitated by a variety of sources in a person’s social ecology. This suggests a very individual approach to understanding how the social environment assists in rebuilding a sense of self and the world, rather than a prescriptive formula. Second, understanding how social ecologies assist in meaning finding depends on knowing how individual history affects the degree of disruption to the assumptive world. For example, *rallying around* could be considered a combination of instrumental support where friends and family take care of daily chores, and also provide emotional support. But for individuals who had a high sense of mastery and had never had the need to receive this type of support, *rallying around* held special meaning in facilitating an experience of connectedness with others and sense of compassion. Third, the length of time to new meaning varied from what descriptions of nearly instantaneous to very long journeys of many years. Regardless, a great
deal of thought was involved in understanding a moment of insight or a long period of struggle. Throughout this process, a person’s social ecology continued to provide an array of relationships, resources, and experiences important for a person to learn about themselves and their world.

**Resilience Outcomes of Adjustment and Growth**

Following a difficult life event, outcomes can include adjustment, growth, and continued struggle. For the purposes of this study we are treating these categories as global and discrete, however, it is understood that an individual’s functional level might vary across domains. In the current study, growth was primarily identified by evidence of a cognitive process resulting in new and positive meaning about one’s self or their world. Additionally, narratives were examined for descriptions of behaviors and actions that supported this new meaning.

Understanding growth through thoughts, feelings, and behavior is consistent with prior research on autobiographical narratives about wisdom (Gluck, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005), based on theories that suggest wisdom is more than cognitions and is gained through life experiences (McKee & Barber, 1999; Sternberg, 1998). Similarly, researchers have questioned whether changes in cognition are sufficient to be considered growth and have called for corroborative, observable changes in behavior as a confirmation of actual growth (for reviews see Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Park & Helgeson, 2006).

Using behaviors to authenticate cognitions as actual or illusory growth introduces new challenges. For example, how would the construct of compassion be operationalized? What behavior(s) does a person exhibit when acting with thoughts of compassion? Could a person feel compassion yet not behave in a manner that is identified as such? Conversely, could a person behave in a manner identified as compassionate yet not have cognitions of compassion? The relative importance of cognition and behavior has a long history in psychology, and Roepke,
Forgeard, and Elstein (2014) wisely encourage researchers to “adopt a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between cognitive and behavioural change in PTG” (p. 347). Qualitative data is well suited to provide nuanced explorations of the linkages between cognition and behavior as outcomes following a difficult life event but is not exempt from the challenges of disentangling contradictions between thoughts and behavior.

**Coder ratings of adjustment and growth.** In order to explore the connections between meaning finding (i.e. cognitions) and behaviors that reflected growth, coders categorized each narrative for an overall rating of adjustment or growth. Initially we had the category of “struggling,” but it was eliminated because all respondents showed indications of adjustment despite some low level struggle for those with ongoing situations. Although the veridicality of autobiographical memory has been questioned, memories “act as a storehouse of complex, integrated information about our life experiences” (Gluck et al., 2005, p. 198). The evaluative quality of autobiographical accounts that are situated within a person’s developmental history (McAdams, 2006a), makes an integrated understanding of the cognitions and behaviors of adjustment and growth possible.

Coders were instructed to use all interview data that included thoughts, feelings, and behaviors relevant to the event, and any comments about their lives in general. Adjustment and growth were coded without consideration of already coded categories of meaning disruption. Also, respondents were not systematically asked for behavioral examples of changes they had made as a result of their resilience process. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be reasonable, Kappa = 0.72 (p < 0.001) which is considered substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Disagreements were discussed to resolution. These discussions required verification within the interview text and consideration of intended meaning when a sentence or
thought was incomplete. Twenty-nine (58%) respondents were coded as demonstrating growth and 21 (42%) were coded as adjustment. We share examples of the complementary and contradictory linkages between meaning, thoughts, and behavior to underscore the importance of recognizing that individuals and their lives are indeed complex.

**Rater Coded Adjustment.** Individuals who were coded as adjustment demonstrated recovery from their difficult life event, frequently showed an ability to sustain positive function, but did not describe new meaning and understanding as a result of their life event. The largest subgroup of adjustment (n = 11) included those who described a life event that did not cause disruption to their sense of meaning (see Table 4). This category of *Little to No Questioning of Meaning* was described earlier in the results. To briefly summarize, high congruence between pre-event beliefs, subsequent cognitions, and behavior suggested that the challenging event was successfully resolved with the resources available and fit within the individual’s worldview. However, even within the most straightforward category, there were details within some interviews that created challenges in making a tentative decision about resilience outcomes. For example, Jane’s (#11) traumatic experience of her daughter’s death was approached with acceptance of something she could not alter. Jane made a statement that reflected increased compassion when stated how she now *thinks more deeply about other people that you lose [loved ones]*, yet that comment was considered in balance with her unchanging view on life: *I really don’t think it changed it very much . . . I feel sad and wish it hadn’t happened, but it’s not something that rules our life.* Adjustment rather than growth was more central to Jane’s narrative that included comments about her activities (behaviors) in life reflective of hedonic well-being (adjustment): *We have season tickets to everything and don’t make it to all of them. We have football and basketball and symphony and opera and all. It keeps us young.* Although
Jane provided that single statement of increased empathy, she was coded as *adjustment* when all statements were considered within a contextual whole.

For others rated as *adjustment*, the assumptive world was confirmed (*n* = 4) by their challenging life event. These individuals viewed their life event within an existing meaning framework, and did not discuss any growth or changes in thoughts or behavior. Possibly these respondents had already experienced growth prior to the current event, as in Susan’s (#36) case, where the death of her adult daughter (i.e., the target event) was preceded by the death of Susan’s husband. Her daughter’s death was confirmation that *you never know what’s going to happen*, suggesting an understanding of uncertainty (i.e., growth-related meaning). Susan had participated in a grief group after her husband’s death and now believes that *if there’s something you really want to do, you’d better do it*. She explained that she has worked her *bucket list*: *I pretty much have gone through my list of things I wanted to do, so I think I’m pretty good with that*. Susan was *sad* and *heartbroken* yet she stated that she did *not really* change because of this event, consequently was rated as *adjustment*.

Susan considered herself already *pretty wise* and is sustaining her practice of wise thoughts and actions in her recovery. Her interview highlighted the importance of temporal factors in understanding adjustment and growth that include past and future life events. Susan successfully adjusted to the death of her daughter, but through previously learned lessons of growth. Susan’s case illustrates the dynamics of adjustment and growth in which a life span trajectory of development is occurring even when adjustment to a specific life event is more evident.

Six respondents were coded as *adjustment* yet described disruptions to their sense of meaning. They all experienced events that prompted questions about their sense of self or the
world but did not, by the coder’s evaluations, experience growth beyond recovery or sustaining positive function. This group offers suggestions on how strategies to adjust to a challenge are beneficial yet can also contribute to a premature foreclosure on growth.

For example, Sam (#31) described a *thoroughly humbling experience* when he failed his professional exam. This failure caused him to question his understanding of himself and his competencies, but he readily resolved the situation at his retest: *I passed it in a breeze.* He engaged in enough introspection to gain awareness of his tendency to be overconfident and *sometimes thinking [he] could do it without the hard work.* But Sam continued to be overconfident: *I tend to overvalue what I know and what I can do* and needed to use his early failure as a *good reminder.* He demonstrated awareness and is able to use his life lesson to adjust in the moment, but by his own description does not change those aspects of himself that lead to overconfidence. Sam’s narrative is an example of inconsistencies in awareness and behavior over time; it is not perfectly synchronous. Change might be indicated by Sam’s ability to articulate his insight and describe situations where this insight was applied, but this change is more indicative of a greater ability to *adjust.* His behavior can be modified but Sam remains fundamentally overconfident. If *growth* were achieved, this would be reflected in his thoughts and actions that demonstrated changes to Sam’s meaning system that leads to overvaluing and overconfidence.

In contrast to Sam’s goal-focused recovery, this subsample (i.e., questioned meaning/rated as adjustment) also included individuals who were emotionally dysregulated by their life event, struggled, and eventually achieved some recovery primarily by restoring their hedonic well-being. Karen (#12) was overwhelmed by her grief over her husband’s death and felt *unglued* for several years. The continued importance of Karen’s loss was indicated by her
awareness of the amount of time that had elapsed: *13 years, ten months and I don’t know how many days, but who’s counting?* Her sense of self as *always very happy all the time* was severely disrupted by her grief. She regained positive functioning with the help of her network of friends, but expressed caution about loving someone again in order to avoid the emotional pain: *maybe I don’t ever want to get in that situation again.* Karen sensed that she had changed but was unable to articulate these differences: *Oh, it changed me definitely, definitely changed me. But I’m not really sure in what ways. You’d really have to ask friends of mine that knew me . . . because . . . I can’t explain it.* Karen has not gained insight that she can access but has been able to *hike and canoe and do the things that [she] enjoys doing* – an indication of an adjustment that supports hedonic well-being. These activities addressed hedonic issues that helped to restore Karen’s disrupted sense of self as a *happy* person, but her sense of self also included gaps in self-understanding. She knows that she is different, cannot explain how, but at this point her adjustment as a *happy* person may have diverted her from further introspection: *I really don’t think I’m any wiser.*

Cognitive processing was also inhibited with respondents who exerted too much control over their negative thoughts and feelings. Edith (#43) acknowledged that the world she knew was shattered when her husband announced he planned to divorce her.

> *I pretended to myself that it didn’t matter. I think for a year or two I kind of repressed my feelings of rejection and then sadness and then probably anger at him. I refused to get angry at him. Sometimes you’re not really honest with yourself . . . there was a lot of feelings I was stuffing down.*

Edith’s adjustment is enough without gaining wisdom through the process. Edith feels she is doing well in maintaining the family tradition of being older and successfully aging by looking for ways to gain new experience but not necessarily new insights.
I learned, but I don’t know whether I’m any wiser . . . I’m doing writing and things now that I have more energies to put into that kind of creativity rather than hazarding another relationship with the opposite sex . . . forget it, forget it! Been there, done that, and let’s move on to other uh, other things to explore.

**Coder rated growth.** Most respondents who were categorized as *growth* described challenges to their meaning systems \( n = 26 \). We examined their meaning finding processes in the previous section. We focused this analysis on three of the 29 respondents who were rated as *growth* that had reported little questioning of meaning, or had their meaning validated. Although they represent a very small proportion of the entire sample (6%), a closer examination of their accounts is warranted. These individuals represent a challenge to theories that frame meaning disruption as a necessary mechanism for growth. Alternative factors such as other growth promoting activities, personality, aspects of the social environment, and even temporal factors such as age at event may explain outcomes of growth that are not related to meaning disruption caused by a single target event.

The birth of a disabled son, death of a husband at midlife, and a life threatening medical emergency are significant and unanticipated life events – so called curveballs in life. Yet the retrospective accounts of Dolly (#39), Betty (#98), and Barbara (#23) did not contain questioning of meaning. One possibility was that thoughts of meaning disruption had receded during the approximately 30 years that had elapsed. However, as seen with individuals who reported they questioned meaning, the time elapsed did not eliminate their recollection of a challenge to their meaning system. Thus, we examined the narratives of these respondents for other attributes that might explain the experience of growth that did not involve the disruption of personal or global meaning. Four common features included: (1) a transformative event had occurred in early adulthood; (2) there was a gradual process leading up to the target event; (3) the life event was...
viewed as a positive turning point; and (4) engagement in activities that involved connections with and contributions to others.

First, each respondent had experienced their difficult life event or made reference to another transformative experience at a young age. Betty became a Christian in her teen years. Barbara was in her early 20s when she experienced a moment of clarification that she could trust the universe without Catholicism, and Dolly was in her 20s when she responded to the special needs of her first child.

Second, the process leading up to the critical event was gradual. Betty had decades of knowing that her husband’s disease was a disease where you knew the end was coming so it wasn’t an instant thing, with a lot of people, losing loved ones. Barbara had a period of religious questioning before her medical emergency: I was not a practicing Catholic. Dolly explained that her son’s disabilities took a year to become evident: we didn’t really know until he was pretty close to a year old. He just seemed slow in his development. Each wrestled with uncertainty prior to the target event that may have cultivated an understanding of their world that was useful later.

Third, although not immediately, the event itself was seen as a turning point for something positive that involved increased confidence in self, the world, and connections to the world. After two years, Betty could see that her husband’s death was a turning point . . . it actually gave me eventually confidence that I could go ahead . . . but the life ahead was equally a beautiful life. Barbara saw her moments before surgery as a real moment of transition . . . I would always go back to that moment of transition and think, ‘Gee, I just have to be really accepting here of whatever is to happen. To trust that whatever happens, I’ll be carried through. Dolly found that she and her husband got involved in a whole other phase that we wouldn’t have
thought of had we not had our own challenge and we met lots of wonderful people through it, lots of fine professionals over the years. Their challenging life events came to be a touchstone of confidence, hope, and trust.

Finally, these women engaged in activities that connected them with people in ways that contributed to the well-being of others. The sense that their life event had been a turning point was, in part, because their circle of concern had expanded and they continued to live with generativity. Betty developed a business that employed many people, raised grandchildren, and in her retirement she was volunteering: *I do volunteer gardening, and I’m sort of a facilitator for a couple of older ladies.* She also volunteered for a reading program for grade school children. Barbara described how she is *working for other people* to help them with *some undeveloped talent that they think they always wanted to do something with.* Dolly recalled that their efforts to develop services for their disabled son was also something that others needed: *We took it as a challenge to reach out and do it for other people. . . . to try to help others.*

In many ways, these respondents were engaged in developing facets of wisdom prior to their specific life events, in contrast to other growth respondents who found such meaning afterwards. This suggests that less cataclysmic challenges that encourage questioning over time may contribute to a worldview that is better suited to understanding future challenges. Barbara’s separation from the religious teachings of her childhood before her critical life event set the stage for her to be *more trusting* in herself: *It’s not somebody else who knows best.* Similarly, Betty’s emotional work had likely occurred throughout her husband’s illness and it could be speculated that her questioning of meaning occurred when he was first diagnosed. Once she gained *confidence to go forth* she was fully engaged with work, her children, grandchildren, traveling, and volunteerism that reflected both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being: *I think that your*
eighties should be the prime of real enjoyment and real feeling of accomplishment, and you’re not concerned with a lot of anxieties and stresses of another era before that time. Perhaps these women acquired aspects of wisdom early in life through daily challenges and reflections. Over time and with the right opportunity, they were able to demonstrate their development in ways that were clear to themselves and others.

Summary. The primary purpose of this analysis was to explore those who did not fit the main trends of the data in which those who were rated as adjustment tended to not question meaning, and those rated as growth tended to question meaning. What can be learned about the resilience process from those who were rated as adjustment? Clearly, the degree of congruence between prior ways of seeing one’s self and the world and the experience of the target life event seemed important. Congruence between personal, global meaning and difficult life events tended to reinforce whatever standpoint existed whether it was a sense of mastery, control, or even an acceptance of uncertainty. Thus, when a single life event is considered within the scope of a person’s life span, it is possible that ratings of adjustment may reflect growth that has previously occurred. In a specific instance of challenge, a person may simply be engaged in practicing what they had previously learned.

For those rated as adjustment that experienced incongruence between their worldviews and difficult live events, this discordance appeared to create some lack of ease when questions were asked but not pursued, or even avoided. Recovery and an ability to sustain positive function can be achieved without engaging in meaning finding, thus reflecting a hedonic approach to well-being.

These results highlight the complexities in making determinations of growth and adjustment post trauma, even when thoughts are viewed in combination with behavior. Humans
can be inconsistent in their thoughts and behaviors and timelines of adjustment and growth are not linear. Rather, it is a long, bumpy, and sometime meandering pathway that goes from adversity to growth.
Table 3. Summary of Event, Meaning, and Growth Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Type</th>
<th>No questions</th>
<th>Meaning validated</th>
<th>Meaning questioned</th>
<th>Adjustment</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of close other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/retirement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; safety concerns (other)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce/breakup</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family conflict</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; safety concerns (self)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; safety concerns (self and others)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (N = 50)</strong></td>
<td><strong>13 (26%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>5 (10%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>32(64%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>21(42%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>29 (58%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men (n = 14)</td>
<td><strong>7 (50%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>1 (7%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>6 (43%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>9 (64%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>5 (36%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (n = 36)</td>
<td><strong>6 (17%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>4 (11%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>26 (72%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>12 (33%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>24 (67%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Meaning Disruption by Outcomes of Adjustment and Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adjustment</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No/Little Questioning of Meaning</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validated/Confirmed Meaning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioned Meaning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5
Discussion

Growth following adversity is an inherently developmental topic (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004). How growth occurs in adulthood is a long-standing question, yet answers have remained elusive. Our goal was not to find the answer to this question, but to widen our lens to include the nuances of experience in the narratives of fifty individuals. Through an inductive analytic process, the respondents’ experience centered around a single, difficult life event. Disruptions to meaning in life, and finding new meaning through transactions with the social environment emerged as theoretically important. We begin with a brief summary of the main findings from this study and introduce issues raised by our results. We discuss these questions drawing from the fields of resilience, personality, social support, and wisdom. We conclude with how these findings might be applied.

Summary of Findings

Respondents were generally quick to identify a specific challenging life event. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents shared events that had challenged, or clarified their sense of meaning, suggesting that events with personal significance were attached to constructions of meaning. Every category of life event type involved at least one respondent who had questioned meaning, but with some event types, global meaning remained intact. Our results offer support to the fundamental theoretical assumptions of stress-related growth (Aldwin et al., 2004, 2007; Park, 2010) and posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004): disruption of global meaning activates cognitive processes by which growth is potentiated. In this study, nearly all of those who were rated by coders as demonstrating growth had indeed described questioning their sense
of meaning supporting theories of meaning disruption. However, three growth respondents did not mention asking meaning related question post adversity even though their situations were viewed as difficult. Although this is only 6% of the total sample, “whatever exists at all exists in some amount” (Thorndike, 1918, p. 16). Thus, these three respondents represent a challenge to the idea that growth requires a disruption to a person’s meaning framework. This touches on the related question of whether positive development can be experienced without adversity.

Is meaning disruption needed for growth? The disruption of meaning is often assumed to be a consequence of significant adversity in which one’s existing worldview is inadequate for making sense of the difficult event. However, as we have described in this study, this issue is not straightforward. Difficult events do not always result in questions about meaning (Davis et al., 2000), and although not addressed in the current study, questions of meaning can occur without adversity. There is a temptation to frame the question of growth as one of needing adversity or not. However, just as other “Cartesian-split-mechanistic worldviews” in developmental science have been set aside (Overton, 2013, p. 38), this question can be viewed as an issue of how growth is promoted through the cognitive processes of meaning, in response to the ebb and flow of adversity over a lifetime. Two themes frame this topic: the temporal aspects of the resilience process, and transactions with our social ecologies.

Temporal aspects of the resilience process. As a culture, we have many sayings that link adversity with time such as “time heals all wounds,” and “it was his time to die.” Time and timing are fundamental aspects of the resilience process. We present two temporal issues that we observed during our analysis of the interviews. These aspects of time informed our understanding of the growth processes, and also indicated what would be important to study.
**Obscured temporal order.** The study of resilience processes and outcomes can be hampered by a lack of contextual details, perhaps because of a tendency by researchers to frame their questions in a linear fashion, and by the respondent who obliges the interviewer with a linear presentation that begins with the target event. Susan (#36) described her experiences after receiving the news that her adult daughter had died. Susan said that her outlook on life didn’t change but instead was reinforced - *you don’t know how much time you have.* Nearly as an aside, she shared that after her husband died, she made a bucket list she wanted to do and has worked through her list. The meaning Susan used to understand the death of her daughter was the result of her explorations of meaning she engaged in after her husband’s death. That critical piece of information was almost missed. Understanding the network of connections between events, meaning finding, adjustment and growth should include the past as well as the target event, and other experiences that are associated with meaning. Meaning is also attached to the future in a way that affect the choices we make in the present, as illustrated by Susan actively working through her bucket list.

**Timing.** When Barbara (#23) faced a life-threatening situation in her early 20s, she experienced a moment of grace and confidence that she would be carried through. Thereafter, whenever she was in a difficult situation she *would always go back to that moment of transition and think, ‘Gee, I just have to be really accepting here of whatever is to happen.’* At a young age, finding meaning that helped her to be comfortable with uncertainty was an advantage that Barbara enjoyed throughout her adult life. In a somewhat related study of meaning, Jennings, Aldwin, Levenson, Spiro, and Mroczek (2006) showed that the perception of having benefited from military service was positively associated with wisdom scores ten years later. Growth related outcomes following challenging events, depended on the meaning attributed to the event.
What about difficult life events that occur in late life? Charles and Carstensen (2007) argued, similarly to Staudinger and Bowen (2010), that the resilience process in late life would favor adjustment rather than growth. According to socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003), a preference for relationships with significant others would be greater than a desire to enlarge their social networks. While this might generally be the case, our oldest respondent Dorothy (#99) was busy broadening her social circle as well as her mind at 90 years old. With the years she had left, she was enjoying her newly recognized love of learning. This demonstrates how motivation in late-late life can be informed by possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Transactions with the social environment to promote growth. The respondents in this study universally involved others in their resilience processes that facilitated both adjustment and growth. Individuals turned to family and friends, but also sought new sources of information and made new connections. When viewing adversity as an aspect of life that ebbs and flows over a lifetime, the “architecture of support” (Gage-Bouchard et al., 2015, p. 59) is required to be more flexible than this metaphor implies, because the individual ideally makes changes to their sense of self and worldview. The foundation of significant others, the additions of experimentally similar others, and the inclusion of those who are brought into one’s circle of concern are part of this dynamic social environment. Mary (#16) sought the support and guidance of a grief support group, but her view of herself shifted over time and was reflected in her realization that she could help others in dealing with feelings of loneliness. She expanded her circle of concern by inviting bereaved individuals into her home for dinners.

The meta-model of relational developmental systems paradigm (RDS; Overton, 2013) offers a perspective that emphasizes the mutual influence of individuals and multiple levels of
contexts over time (i.e., history, temporal, presence of change). The potential for change is theorized to occur because of the relative plasticity in human development that is derived “from connections between the individual and the multiple levels of his or her changing context” and the processes involved (Lerner & Schmid, 2013, p. 373). Our findings provided examples of how transactions between the individual and their contexts, theorized by RHD, to result in meaning finding – an example of socio-cognitive plasticity.

**Change-promoting environments.** This study found evidence for growth (i.e., positive change) that was the result of cognitive processing of discordant meanings prompted by a difficult life event. Similarly, changes to personality traits are “most likely the result of the long-term press of social environments that are chosen for reasons other than personality trait development (e.g. interests, abilities, or goals)” (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008, p. 390). Taken together, this suggests that some pressure, push, and discomfort are needed to change. But, can positive development occur without the context of adversity?

Brandstädter (1999) theorized that individual goal setting was self-directed development. Feeney and Collins (2014) have also described active pursuits of opportunities for development and growth outside of a context of adversity. Although the voluntary aspect of a self-initiated goal pursuit is clearly distinguished from an unexpected and unwanted life event, the potential challenge to the individual cannot be overlooked. Jack (#49) chose to attend a week-long leadership workshop that he described as a very difficult week. By mid-week, Jack considered leaving the retreat and remarked: *I don’t have anything to prove.* These statements suggest that Jack’s self-directed experience was challenging enough to provoke thoughts of leaving and build his confidence. As a result of his participation, Jack made significant life changes including
attending college and changing jobs at midlife. Implied in Jack’s narrative is that some amount of difficulty and challenge was important.

**Imagining a future.** Respondents who had their worldviews shaken experienced vulnerability, and also an openness to new ideas. Much like the hermit crab without its protective shell, times of questioning have the potential to reduce defenses that might normally keep out new ways of thinking. Kastenbaum (1981) theorized that illusions of the assumptive world are maintained by hyperhabituation – a tendency to categorize our experiences as matching our existing framework. Consequently, breaking free of those illusions is a difficult task because preconceptions are often outside of awareness.

During this period of questioning, respondents explored and observed their environments in both direct and indirect ways. Individuals sought out experts and experientially similar others to learn new skills, and also quietly observed how others handled difficulties. Fran (#24) entered the workforce for the first time and gained an informal mentor in her supervisor who demonstrated how a difficult personal life could be negotiated with compassion. Gloria (#96) and others found new ways of seeing themselves because of social change occurring at the time such as the feminist movement.

Exposure to novel ideas and experiences with the social environment provides the inspiration needed to imagine a future. Seligman and his colleagues (2013) theorized that what a person moves towards may be more powerful than what was in the past, but left as an open question where ideas of possible futures come from. Susan (#36) worked her bucket list and was drawn forward by her list in a way that seemed to support her adjustment, but at the same time allowed her to become more comfortable with uncertainty – an aspect of wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).
Hooker and McAdams’ (2003) six foci model of personality includes “personal action constructs” that are the “forward-looking features of personality” (p. 299). The model elaborates on goal repertoires that change over time and are facilitated by supportive scaffolding from others as a new skill becomes a part of the self. A poignant example of this essential scaffolding was Jill (#59), who spent a year in silence after her husband died suddenly. It was just very hard for me to rejoin life . . . and to have these people right here, always ready to keep me going. Even though Jill never said a word at social gatherings, these new found friends accepted and supported her without conditions.

Conclusion

This study asked second-generation questions about the mechanics that explain how experiences with adversity lead to positive development. Initially, our question was open to exploring all aspects of resilience processes that individuals described. But as a result of our analysis, our focus centered on transactions within the social environment that emerged in such variety and prominence. Although this should not have been a surprise given the centrality of relationships in the child resilience literature, the adult literature has tended to focus on the individual, in part because resilience continues to be operationalized by individual attributes by measures such as the Conner Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003).

The importance of the social environment to positive outcomes has been included in theories of posttraumatic growth (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and stress-related growth (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004), but offer little specificity about the matter. Similar to our findings, Ryff’ (2014) presented a theoretical framework of resilience using eudaimonic well being to illustrate the importance of finding meaning, and having close personal relationships. She presented three exemplars of resilience using autobiographies (i.e. Mark
Mathabane, Ben Mattlin, and Victor Frankl) to illustrate “how it is done” but does not explicate the social processes (p 18).

The contribution of this study is in the descriptions of how individuals, following adversity, transacted with their social environments to facilitate types of meaning finding which reflected aspects of personal wisdom. The types of social environment transactions go beyond the broad and often-used categories of received, perceived, and provided support and offer tentative, explanatory processes that connect adversity (and meaning disruption) to growth. The emotional and instrumental support provided by friends and family reinforced a sense of “mattering” (Thoits, 2011) to others in a way that was deeply reassuring. Evidence of this connection with others might always be present but something to which we become hyper-habituated. With reassurance of mattering, respondents were able to explore new ideas, connections with people, and experiences. These transactions with their social environment led to a sense of self and the world in which new meaning was found.

Life involves suffering but the experiences of loss and other traumas have potential for positive development in adulthood. Resilience, as both adjustment and growth, is facilitated by our engaged, transactions with our social environments. “Who we become, the opportunities we are given or denied, the decisions we make, the actions we take, the meaning we derive—these are all intimately tangled up in social relationships” (Settersten, 2015, p. 217).

Limitations

The strengths of this study also created areas of vulnerability. Respondents were asked to identify a challenging or difficult life event but were not restricted to the past 3-5 years, for example. Consequently, respondents were free to choose and reported events from two to over 50 years ago. This yielded a variety of event types, but more importantly, the respondents had
often selected a challenging event, which they had worked through, if necessary, to find meaning. Shorter time lines of three to five years may only be able to capture continued distress or early adjustment depending on the target event. However, more distant events may be affected by memory distortions and a positivity bias in which greater attention attention would be shared about the positive aspects of the situation. Both distortions and positivity are possibilities and their effects cannot be determined in this study; however, we argue that the precise details that are subject to distortions are less important than the perspectives of meaning. Also, respondents expressed, and some with strong emotion, the negative aspects of an event from the distant past. Retrospective, self-reported data has come under criticism for lacking veridicality (Coyne & Tennen, 2010; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014), but this view countered: “claims concerning the general unreliability of retrospective reports are exaggerated” (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993, p. 82). Nonetheless, triangulating self-report with corroborative reports or using prospective study designs as suggested could be helpful while introducing new challenges.

Another possible limitation was the difference in age between our interviewers and the respondents that may have affected aspects of the interview process such as the specific event chosen to discuss, the degree of detail shared, or the need tell an instructive story with a positive ending. Although infrequent, we did note when a respondent sounded uncertain about which life event to choose as described earlier in the results.

This sample is a highly educated and remarkably healthy group of older adults. Although there is a range of income levels, these individuals had all attained at least some college education. The aim of qualitative analysis is more of theory building than to generalize; however, the attributes of education, health, and ethnicity (White) may reflect their access to resources within their social environment. For example, the use of grief support groups was
important to respondents who experienced bereavement, and this may not be a resource available to those living in communities that are remote and impoverished. The types of social environment transactions found with this sample may not be relevant to those in situations of chronic stress, and environmental impoverishment where opportunities for agentic thoughts and behaviors might be limited.

**Future Directions**

The relationship between adjustment and growth is dynamic, nonlinear, and likely orthogonal. Clinical psychology has understandably focused on processes that lead to adjustment as recovery and sustaining positive function. Symptom reduction, a return to previous activities, preservation of relationships, and positive affect are important objectives. Yet, also important to psychological well-being is a sense of meaning about oneself and the world that can gracefully accept difficult and even traumatic life events. Lifespan developmental perspectives about transformative growth can complement existing therapeutic approaches and help to heal the whole person.

Therapeutic approaches exist that take a lifespan developmental perspective, such as life review therapy (Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2010), which seeks to integrate life events with a sense of meaning and mastery (for reviews see Aldwin & Igarashi, 2015; Bohlmeijer, Roemer, Cuijpers, & Smit, 2007; Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012). These approaches generally focus on an individual’s cognitive processes. While cognitive processing is an essential aspect of facilitating growth, as demonstrated in our study and the research reviewed, our study also suggests that resources for growth be expanded to the broader social environment. We propose that further exploration of how social ecologies facilitate growth beyond adjustment be pursued. Of particular importance is an examination the transactions between individuals and their social
environment that facilitates engagement in meaning-finding by expanding the view of what is possible in life.
References


StataCorp. (2011). Stata Statistical Software: Release 12. College Station, TX: StataCorp LP.


Appendices
Appendix A. Life Experience Questionnaire

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire is divided into different parts. Please pay attention to the following points:

Please read the instructions before answering the questions.

There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer in the way that feels best to you.

Overall, the questionnaire has quite a few questions. If you should feel tired or lose your interest in answering the questions, stop for awhile and continue a little bit later.

If you don’t know how to answer a question, don’t think too much about it and answer it in the way that fits you best.

If you want to correct an answer you gave, please cross out the wrong answer clearly.

You are free not to answer all questions, but we would appreciate receiving as complete answers as possible.

You are free to withdraw your participation at any time.

You can talk to one of us at any time to get more information about the background of this research.

Your answers are highly confidential

Thank you very much for your work and support!
LIFE EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

For each of the following questions, please circle or write in the answer which is most appropriate for you or for how you feel.

1. What is your sex? 1. male 2. female

2. What is your birth date?

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

month year

3. Please circle the category(ies) which best describe(s) your educational status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BA/BS</th>
<th>CREDENTIAL/ LICENSURE</th>
<th>WORKING TOWARDS HIGHER DEGREE</th>
<th>MA/MS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>DVM</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>JD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Please circle the category(ies) which best describe(s) the ethnic group(s) with which you identify.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EUROPEAN AMERICAN</th>
<th>AFRICAN AMERICAN</th>
<th>HISPANIC</th>
<th>ASIAN</th>
<th>AMERICAN INDIAN</th>
<th>OTHER (EXPLAIN)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other ___________________________________________
5. Which of these categories best describes your household income?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LESS THAN $10,000</th>
<th>$10,000 - $29,999</th>
<th>$30,000 - $49,999</th>
<th>$50,000 - $74,999</th>
<th>$75,000 - $99,999</th>
<th>$100,000+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Which of these categories best describes your current marital status?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGLE/NEVER MARRIED</th>
<th>COHABITING</th>
<th>MARRIED</th>
<th>SEPARATED</th>
<th>DIVORCED</th>
<th>WIDOWED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Is your spouse currently living in your household?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>I HAVE NO SPOUSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. With which religious group do you currently identify?

1. No affiliation
2. Agnostic
3. Buddhist
4. Catholic
5. Protestant
6. Hindu
7. Jewish
8. Muslim
9. Atheist
10. LDS
11. Nondenominational Christian
12. Other

9. How frequently do you participate in formal religious services?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEVER</th>
<th>1 - 2 TIMES PER YEAR</th>
<th>1 - 2 TIMES PER MONTH</th>
<th>WEEKLY</th>
<th>DAILY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. How often do you meditate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEVER</th>
<th>1 – 2 TIMES PER YEAR</th>
<th>1 – 2 TIMES PER MONTH</th>
<th>WEEKLY</th>
<th>DAILY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. How many living children do you have?

12. How many living stepchildren do you have?

13. How many children live with you (children and stepchildren)?

14. Of those children and stepchildren who do not live with you, how many live within an hour's drive?

15. Besides your spouse or children, is there anyone else currently living in your household? (Write “0” if there is none.)

Number of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARENTS</th>
<th>PARENTS-IN-LAW</th>
<th>OTHER RELATIVES</th>
<th>FRIENDS</th>
<th>OTHER PERSONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

16. Other than those living in your household, how many relatives do you have living within an hour's drive?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NONE</th>
<th>ONE</th>
<th>TWO TO FIVE</th>
<th>SIX TO TEN</th>
<th>MORE THAN TEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
17. To what extent can you rely on *family members* for help in a crisis?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOT AT ALL</th>
<th>A LITTLE</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>A LOT</th>
<th>COMPLETELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18. How many close friends do you have?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NONE</th>
<th>ONE</th>
<th>TWO TO FIVE</th>
<th>SIX TO TEN</th>
<th>MORE THAN TEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. Are you satisfied with the number of close friends you have?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VERY DISSATISFIED</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED</th>
<th>SATISFIED</th>
<th>PRETTY SATISFIED</th>
<th>VERY SATISFIED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. How many people do you feel you can tell just about anything to—someone you can count on for understanding and advice?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO ONE</th>
<th>ONE PERSON</th>
<th>TWO OR MORE PERSONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is their relationship to you? (Example: Friend, spouse, uncle)
21. To what extent can you rely on friends for help in a crisis?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOT AT ALL</th>
<th>A LITTLE</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>A LOT</th>
<th>COMPLETELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22. How often do you see or speak with at least one of the types of people listed below?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEE OR SPEAK WITH AT LEAST ONE OF YOUR:</th>
<th>DOES NOT APPLY</th>
<th>NEARLY EVERY DAY</th>
<th>ONCE A WEEK</th>
<th>ONCE OR TWICE A MONTH</th>
<th>EVERY 2 OR 3 MONTHS</th>
<th>ONCE OR TWICE A YEAR</th>
<th>NEVER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARENTS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHILDREN</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRANDCHILDREN</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROTHERS OR SISTERS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER RELATIVES</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOSE FRIENDS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions regarding your daily activities

Please rate yourself on a scale from 1 to 4, indicating the extent to which you agree with each one using the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISAGREE STRONGLY</th>
<th>DISAGREE SOMewhat</th>
<th>AGREE SOMewhat</th>
<th>AGREE STRONGLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I generally can figure our how to get things done with the knowledge that I have.  
   1  2  3  4

2. I hate not knowing what’s going to happen.  
   1  2  3  4

3. I am good at understanding the needs of others in my family.  
   1  2  3  4

4. What is appropriate at one stage of the lifespan is not necessarily appropriate at another stage  
   1  2  3  4

5. There have been occasions when I felt like smashing things.  
   1  2  3  4

6. There is a right way and a wrong way to do things.  
   1  2  3  4

7. When working on a task with others, I can balance the interests and abilities of individuals in the group.  
   1  2  3  4

8. I am good at knowing what I know and don’t know.  
   1  2  3  4

9. I have a hard time prioritizing and figuring out which problem to tackle first.  
   1  2  3  4

10. No matter who I’m talking to, I’m always a good listener.  
    1  2  3  4

11. I like to act spontaneously.  
    1  2  3  4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISAGREE STRONGLY</th>
<th>DISAGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE STRONGLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. I like to avoid difficult problems, even if it's in an area that is very important to me. 1 2 3 4

13. I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake. 1 2 3 4

14. What's right for me may not be right for someone else. 1 2 3 4

15. As I get older, I am less likely to get upset about problems. 1 2 3 4

16. I don't like interacting with people from different countries. 1 2 3 4

17. In difficult situations, it is hard for me to see the light at the end of the tunnel. 1 2 3 4

18. I have had a hard time keeping up with changes in my profession. 1 2 3 4

19. I make a point of keeping informed about current events, both locally and internationally. 1 2 3 4

20. If a problem gets too difficult, I can shift my problem-solving strategy to try new approaches. 1 2 3 4

21. If I don't know how to do something, I'm pretty good at finding someone who does know how. 1 2 3 4

22. If things don't go as I think they should, I usually just give up. 1 2 3 4

23. I sometimes try to get even, rather than forgive and forget. 1 2 3 4

24. On a trip, I hate not knowing exactly where I am. 1 2 3 4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISAGREE STRONGLY</th>
<th>DISAGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE STRONGLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25. I enjoy putting myself in new situations which require me to change how I think or behave.  

26. I don’t think my perspective on my problems will change much in the next few years.  

27. I find it very difficult to read others’ feelings.  

28. I am much more comfortable planning ahead.  

29. Before voting, I thoroughly investigate the qualifications of all the candidates.  

30. I get frustrated when people do not share my values.  

31. I am good at identifying the social norms in any given situation.  

32. In most circumstances, I don’t think a person’s age should affect the type of decisions they make.  

33. I like to gossip at times.  

34. I am comfortable spending time with people who do not share my values.  

35. My values have not changed much as I’ve gotten older.  

36. I can usually handle unexpected events.
ATTITUDES TOWARD THE SELF

Please read the statements below and indicate the extent to which you agree with each one, using the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISAGREE STRONGLY</th>
<th>DISAGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE STRONGLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I often engage in quiet contemplation. 1 2 3 4
2. I feel that my individual life is a part of a greater whole. 1 2 3 4
3. I don’t worry about other people’s opinions of me. 1 2 3 4
4. I feel that my life has little meaning. 1 2 3 4
5. I can’t stop worrying about the future. 1 2 3 4
6. I feel a sense of belonging with both earlier and future generations. 1 2 3 4
7. My peace of mind is not easily upset. 1 2 3 4
8. I feel isolated and lonely. 1 2 3 4
9. My sense of well-being does not depend on a busy social life. 1 2 3 4
10. I feel part of something greater than myself. 1 2 3 4
11. My happiness is not dependent on other people and things. 1 2 3 4
12. I do not become angry easily. 1 2 3 4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISAGREE STRONGLY</th>
<th>DISAGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE STRONGLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. I have a good sense of humor about myself. 1 2 3 4
14. I have little patience with other people. 1 2 3 4
15. I find much joy in life. 1 2 3 4
16. Material possessions don’t mean much to me. 1 2 3 4
17. I am not optimistic about the future of humanity. 1 2 3 4
18. I feel compassionate even toward people who have been unkind to me. 1 2 3 4
19. I am not often fearful. 1 2 3 4
20. I can learn a lot from others. 1 2 3 4
21. Life is mainly filled with disappointment. 1 2 3 4
22. I often have a sense of oneness with nature. 1 2 3 4
23. I feel cut off from other generations. 1 2 3 4
24. I am able to accept my mortality. 1 2 3 4
25. I often “lose myself” in what I am doing. 1 2 3 4
26. I feel that I know myself. 1 2 3 4
27. I am accepting of myself, including my faults. 1 2 3 4
28. Different parts of me are often at cross purposes. 1 2 3 4
29. I feel scattered and distracted much of the time. 1 2 3 4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISAGREE STRONGLY</th>
<th>DISAGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>AGREE STRONGLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

30. I am able to integrate the different aspects of my life.  
31. I feel overwhelmed by the demands of life.  
32. I can accept the impermanence of things.  
33. I have grown as a result of losses I have suffered.  
34. Whatever I do to others, I do to myself.

**QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR LIFE SATISFACTION**

Below are five statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1-7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by circling the appropriate number.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>SLIGHTLY DISAGREE</th>
<th>NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE</th>
<th>SLIGHTLY AGREE</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.  
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.  
3. I am satisfied with my life.  
4. So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.  
5. If I could live my life over,  
   I would change almost nothing.
QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR SENSE OF WELL-BEING

In the past week, how often did you experience the following feelings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HARDLY EVER</th>
<th>SOME OF THE TIME</th>
<th>MUCH OR MOST OF THE TIME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor. 0 1 2
2. I felt depressed. 0 1 2
3. I felt everything I did was an effort. 0 1 2
4. My sleep was restless. 0 1 2
5. I was happy. 0 1 2
6. I felt lonely. 0 1 2
7. People were unfriendly. 0 1 2
8. I enjoyed life. 0 1 2
9. I felt sad. 0 1 2
10. I felt that people disliked me. 0 1 2
11. I could not “get going.” 0 1 2
QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR HEALTH

1. In general, would you say your health is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXCELLENT</th>
<th>VERY GOOD</th>
<th>GOOD</th>
<th>FAIR</th>
<th>POOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Compared to one year ago, how would you rate your physical health in general now?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MUCH BETTER</th>
<th>SOMewhat BETTER</th>
<th>ABOUT THE SAME</th>
<th>SOMewhat WORSE</th>
<th>MUCH WORSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Compared to one year ago, how would you rate your emotional health in general now?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MUCH BETTER</th>
<th>SOMewhat BETTER</th>
<th>ABOUT THE SAME</th>
<th>SOMewhat WORSE</th>
<th>MUCH WORSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. The following items are about activities you might do during a typical day. Does your health now limit you in these activities? If so, how much?

(CIRCLE ONE NUMBER ON EACH LINE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES, LIMITED A LOT</th>
<th>YES, LIMITED A LITTLE</th>
<th>NO, NOT LIMITED AT ALL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. MODERATE ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS MOVING A TABLE, PUSHING A VACUUM CLEANER, BOWLING OR PLAYING GOLF?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. CLIMBING SEVERAL FLIGHTS OF STAIRS?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. During the **past 4 weeks**, have you had any of the following problems with your work or other regular daily activities as a result of your physical health?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. ACCOMPLISHED LESS THAN YOU WOULDLIKE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. WERE LIMITED IN THE KIND OF WORK OR OTHER ACTIVITIES</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. During the **past 4 weeks**, have you had any of the following problems with your work or other regular daily activities as a result of any emotional problems (such as feeling depressed or anxious)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. ACCOMPLISHED LESS THAN YOU WOULD LIKE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. DIDN'T DO WORK OR OTHER ACTIVITIES AS CAREFULLY AS USUAL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. During the **past 4 weeks**, how much did pain interfere with your normal work (including both work outside the home and housework)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOT AT ALL</th>
<th>A LITTLE BIT</th>
<th>MODERATELY</th>
<th>QUITE A BIT</th>
<th>EXTREMELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. These questions are about how you feel and how things have been with you during the past 4 weeks. For each question, please give the one answer that comes closest to the way you have been feeling. How much of the time during the past 4 weeks…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Circle one number on each line)</th>
<th>All of the Time</th>
<th>Most of the Time</th>
<th>Good Bit of the Time</th>
<th>Some of the Time</th>
<th>A Little of the Time</th>
<th>None of the Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Have you felt calm and peaceful?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Did you have a lot of energy?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Have you felt downhearted and blue?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting with friends, relatives etc.)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All of the Time</th>
<th>Most of the Time</th>
<th>Some of the Time</th>
<th>A Little of the Time</th>
<th>None of the Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. Is there any physical condition, illness, or health problem that bothers you now?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If YES, what is that condition or problem?
**QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

Please indicate the frequency of the following feelings, which might be experienced during church services, during other religious events or activities, or spontaneously, for each of the items by circling one appropriate number.

Please complete this section irrespective of whether you are an active member of a religious organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEVER</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
<th>OCCASIONALLY</th>
<th>SOMETIMES</th>
<th>OFTEN</th>
<th>ALWAYS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Timelessness            | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
2. Taking part in a shared performance | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
3. Refreshment             | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
4. Quieting of the mind    | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
5. Positive feeling about life | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
6. Opportunities to help others | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
7. Obtaining guidance      | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
8. Loss of sense of self   | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
9. Joy or elation          | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
10. Glimpsing another world | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
11. Feeling uplifted       | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
12. Feeling supported and helped | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
13. Feeling loved          | 0     | 1      | 2            | 3         | 4     | 5      |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEVER</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
<th>OCCASIONALLY</th>
<th>SOMETIMES</th>
<th>OFTEN</th>
<th>ALWAYS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Feeling “at home”  
15. Experiences of unifying vision  
16. Excitement  
17. Enjoying familiar practices  
18. Enjoying company of others present  
19. Contact with God  
20. Calmness  
21. Bodily well-being  
22. Being united with other people  
23. Being part of a family  
24. Being bathed in warmth and light  
25. Being at peace with God
Appendix B. Interview Questions

Part I: Vignettes (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000)
1. A 15-year old girl wants to get married right away. What points would you consider when thinking about giving this girl advice?
2. You get a phone call from a good friend who says that he or she cannot go on any more and has decided to commit suicide. What points would you consider when thinking about giving advice?

Part II: Interview Questions and Prompts (based on Le, 2008)

Q1: Please reflect on a difficult or challenging moment in your life.
   • What was the moment or event?
   • How did you cope with it or resolve it?
   • Did it change your outlook or actions in life in any way?
   • Did it change you in any way?
   • Did you learn anything from this experience? If yes, what did you learn?
   • Would you say that this experience made you wiser? If yes, why?

Q2: How would you describe wisdom? Please describe the characteristics of a wise person.
   Q2a: Using what you think is a wise person, on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 is not at all wise and 7 is extremely wise, where would you rate yourself and why.

Q3: What do you consider to be successful aging?
   Q3a: On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being not at all successful and 7 being extremely successful, where would you rate yourself?

Q4: I would like you to recount a positive experience. Please tell me about one of the best experiences you have had.
Appendix C. Sample of Initial Coding

#12, female, age 70
Written: HAI, 8/30/2014

13 years ago when she was 57, her husband died suddenly. 
Well the most devastating thing in my life is when my husband passed away 
13 years, ten months and I don’t know how many days, but who’s counting? 
He had a heart attack and died.

Becoming unglued
And no I did not handle it well. I just sort of came unglued.

Conflicting pre-death and post event self evaluation
I’ve always thought of myself you know, teaching at the University and all this stuff of being very self sufficient, I could take care of anything. I handled the money in the family…you know I can do this.

I think that I learned that I was not as self reliant as I thought.

Surprising self with emotional upset and degree of unpreparedness

I didn’t have any regrets. That’s the one thing that I can say. Was that we had a very loving relationship and a very good life and, but I just don’t know why I couldn’t imagine living without him.

Unknowingly emotionally dependent

But I didn’t realize that I depended almost entirely on him for my emotional support. I just didn’t recognize that until he was gone. So I don’t know what I did. (Laughing) I guess, because I just really came unglued.

Caregiving by mother – then became caregiver to her mother
And my mother came and never went home. She said that I was not fit to be left alone so she just stayed and then I felt like she needed me and being an only child.

Experiencing changes but uncertain about what they were
Oh, it changed me definitely, definitely changed me. But I’m not really sure in what ways. You’d really have to ask friends of mine that knew me.

Before and I don’t know but I know that I’m a very different person because...I can’t explain it.

Recalling old self as different than new self
I think that I was always very happy all the time, everything was great.
I never worried about anything, even though I was responsible for a lot of the stuff it didn’t bother me but just like say out investments for example, I talked them over with him but he didn’t really care
and he didn’t even want to hear it most of the time. And I went ahead and made the decisions and did whatever.

**Becoming more serious (was this the first bad thing that ever happened?)**

Then I think I take things more seriously.

**Freezing up for 3 years – going from competent to overwhelmed**

After he died, my broker would call and say what about this and that and I’d say, ‘Don’t do anything, don’t do anything. I don’t want to do anything. Just leave everything the way it is.’

And this went on for I think about 3 years before I got to the point where I could stop and really consider this and that and get back to doing some of the things I should do

**Realizing aloneness and independence where consequences are only hers**

it worries me because…I tell the cat and he probably pays as much attention as Bill did. (Both laughing)

But I think I worry more about making decisions than I did when I was making them...but he was there.

**Needing emotional support – back up**

I have the best of friends that I can discuss anything else but I don’t do that with them (discussing finances).

**Avoiding loss as a way to avoid pain/ Becoming more narrow, more restricted after loss**

I don’t know what else I learned. That maybe I don’t ever want to get in that situation again where I love somebody so much that I can’t live without them.

**Seeing only deficit from loss experience – nothing learned, nothing increased, no preparedness**

I really don’t think I’m any wiser.

I don’t know that it made me more wise, it probably did because it made me reflect back onto myself and say, why can’t I handle this situation?

**Questioning self and searching in family legacy**

Well, my mother lost my father and she didn’t come unglued. I mean I’m sure...and she loved my father.  

And they got along great

I mean she went about her business and I just said. ‘Forget it!’
Appendix D. Sample of Memo Writing

What do those who experience growth have in common?

They seem to acknowledge the emotional impact of the event immediately (16 is not such a good fit)

Possible explanations:

1. response is with little defense – the situation is sized up immediately. This may indicates an ability to sustain positive function even during the difficult moment. They are good at adjustment but do it without much illusion.

2. For some like 2, 16, and 23 there has been an awareness prior to the most recent event. 2 grew up with his father being ill so had probably had opportunity to increase his psychological preparedness along the way. #16 did not seem to do much with the death of her first husband but after 3 years figured out how to grow from the experience. #23 had been questioning her religious upbringing and thought of mortality are naturally part of that.

3. Except for #16, the process happens quickly. Maybe because of seeing things for what they are and being somewhat prepared psychologically, adjustment is with less effort after an initial emotional release. What is to be learned comes to them in an instant – as if they have known it all along.

Variations:

#16 is an example of how some struggle through recovery and eventually grow. She read, had help, had support from friends, had resources but still was emotionally gripped by being alone. After 3 years she was better and at 10 years she is happy and doing for others.

#2 and 23 were primed in some ways that set the stage for what seemed like instantaneous growth. The process had begun well before the event however. For #23, her insight in the moment of possible death was what pulled her through. In both these cases, they made future life decisions based on their insight trigger by their upset.

#24 sizes up the situation of her finances and 4 children and concludes she must "dig in." Says she was too busy to consider how she might "cope." This is growth because she radically changes her self concept. This is also a good example of being a super adjuster – doing what you must in a problem focused way.

#32 represents the classic, process oriented approach where the problem is initially approached in her old way and it is evident this is ineffectual. She then searches and takes advantage of the teaching of others to shape a new world view. This begins a lifelong process of understanding the world differently than her prior agentic view but not entirely. Continues to fix and help others like her mother by sharing her perspective of living.
Staudinger and Bowen suggest that those who experience personality growth are those who stay with the negative emotions longer. For some, this is not an elected path – they simply are unable to resolve the loss and are forced to struggle longer.

For others, they are able to face the negative, in part because they have explored this issue before and have some degree of preparedness. The current life event presents an opportunity for these thoughts to come to the surface with great meaning and purpose thus becoming a lifelong defining event in shaping their sense of self.

Summary: looking at the negative is important for growth but folks do this differently:

Surprised – struggle – struggle – recovery – growth
Explore – consider – event- epiphany – growth – sustained growth
Event – growth
Event – struggle - old way – struggle – seek-growth – sustained growth

Therapeutic questions: what is the illusion that you must let go of?

How do you figure this out without having gone through something before? My illusion is the idea of an independent, agentic life when the reality is that what I value keeps me connected. My degree of responsibility is inescapable without losing some essential part of myself. I have had brief periods of liberation but always needed to return to what might be my higher duty.
### To what purpose did the social network serve the respondent?

**Function of social environment (Helgeson & Lopez, 2010)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enlisting aid</th>
<th>id</th>
<th>code</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>id</td>
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<tr>
<td>insider info on getting a job</td>
<td>ADJ</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>failed bar - got extension</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>wife's approval of retirement plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>parents' signature on enlistment</td>
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<td>cosign on loan</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>risk of job termination</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>temp leave</td>
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<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>firing and rehiring</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seeking information/expert advice</th>
<th>id</th>
<th>ADJ/G</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LGBT/PFLAG by request of daughter</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>coping - counselor</td>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assertiveness; psychiatrist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neurologist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>get educated</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>TM, loss group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>sought counselor</td>
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<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>abuse</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>cults</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>leadership training</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>pastoral counselor - anger</td>
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<tr>
<td>bereavement experts</td>
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</table>

**Description of code**

- **Specific request for something tangible and delimited preferred outcome is know**
- **1 direct pathway to objective**
- **highly agentic**
- **building an existing mystery**
- **clear path friends**
- **self-serving - oriented towards own goals**

**Reality check; experts as part of context and available agentic; sought information**

- **1** friend
- **2** spouse
- **3** other family
- **4** employer / work
- **5** field expert
- **6** faith community
- **7** neighbors / community
- **8** support of
- **9** society
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pushing against social environment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I really had to take a stand 3</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>age of realization - assess family</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>denial contrasted with wife's actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>son and mom both depressed 2, 3, 15</td>
<td>80</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>making new connections/network</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>workplace contacts/mentor 4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped other with DD children 5, 7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>built business 4, 7</td>
<td>98</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Receiving unsolicited intervention</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>she escaped murder</td>
<td>109</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>son created business opportunity 3</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my mother came and never went home</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my poor roommates were very worried</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rallying around</th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>they'd do anything for you 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>women almost invariably said... 1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>my family were a big help 2, 7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>call in your chips 13, 6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they all gathered around 1, 5</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>I had a wonderful support system 1, 3</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>love and support of our friends in this con</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we need that and we can't do it alone 1, 3</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Negative aspects of social network enabled awareness**
  - conflict of meaning/beliefs
  - ability to contrast self with others
  - Aversion of losing - glass self
  - When understanding of self is gained, in part, by the absence of this social network prior to difficulty
  - network emerged as part of process

- did not ask for help and was not always aware that help was being given

- community of friends and family support implies large out pouring of support
  - emotional support
  - largely unsolicited once others find out

- **Holding environment (J. Bolman)**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a lot...did rally around</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somebody was always there to talk to me</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt like I had pretty good emotional support</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being held and holding</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>introspection by all family members</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shared memory of father</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intense processing after accident</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing mutual support</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enacting his father's way in life holds him too</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ideas gained, new relationships made</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent navigated towards resources</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agentic; all in the same boat</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being influenced by society, culture</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from the community at large</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like a mother tiger to save them</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learned about beautiful death</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuning into what Betty Freunden...was talking</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I looked to see how they handled it</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>