

Psychological Factors in the Development of Post-Traumatic Growth in Impoverished Communities

Keydy Henriquez¹

¹ Department of Psychology, SUNY New Paltz, USA

Corresponding Author:

Name, Department of Psychology, 1 Hawk Dr., New Paltz, NY 12561
Email: henriuk7@newpaltz.edu

Abstract

Post-Traumatic Growth, which is characterized by resilience and stronger relationships. In low-income communities, poverty adds additional stressor that hinder recovery but also encourage the development of key psychological traits like resilience, hardiness, and sense of coherence that promote post-traumatic growth. This paper examines how these traits help individuals process trauma and grow from adversity.

Keywords: Post traumatic growth, poverty, resilience, religion

Trauma has traditionally been associated with long-term negative outcomes such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Trauma, unlike how it is used in everyday vernacular, signifies some sort of harm to an individual. However, research suggests that trauma can serve as a catalyst for positive psychological change, this is known as post-traumatic growth (PTG). PTG represents a significant shift in what was previously understood of how individuals cope with trauma and adversity; emphasizing positive outcomes such as increased resilience, a deeper appreciation for life, and enhanced interpersonal relationships (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This shift challenges traditional models, which largely focus on the lasting negative effects of trauma by proposing that trauma can lead to profound personal growth and transformation.

The concept of PTG is especially relevant for individuals in impoverished communities where trauma is often compounded by stressors like financial instability, limited access to healthcare, and food insecurity. Previous research has shown that individuals in low socioeconomic status face heightened adversity, but this context can also foster specific factors that contribute to PTG (Henkelmann et al., 2020). Key factors such as resilience, hardiness, a strong sense of coherence, religious coping, and gene-environment interactions are critical for helping individuals in these communities process trauma and achieve positive psychological outcomes. While poverty, undoubtedly presents unique challenges, it also cultivates the development of psychological resources that can facilitate PTG. Communities that face compound stressors often rely on communal resilience, faith, and personal strength to overcome adversity. The contents of this paper will go over these factors and how they impact post traumatic growth in impoverished communities.

Conceptualizing Change after Trauma

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) developed a framework for understanding PTG that identifies five domains of Post-Traumatic Growth. These domains are new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation for life, and spiritual change. These domains provide insight into the diverse ways that trauma survivors may experience growth following their experience. Each domain reflects a different aspect of the self and is a unique manifestation of the individual's capacity to reframe their trauma and find meaning in it. New possibilities involve the identification of new goals, opportunities, or interests that emerge after trauma which can signify a shift in life priorities. Experiencing trauma may lead the individual to reconsider their priorities, leading to new directions in life that promote personal and social growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Relating to others refers to the development of deeper and more meaningful relationships, often emerging from the increased empathy that individuals feel towards others who have experienced similar hardships, which can transform social interactions and create a stronger sense

of community (Dunn et al., 2014). Personal strength is the realization that individuals are capable of enduring and overcoming significant adversity, fostering a greater sense of self-efficacy. Appreciation for life reflects heightened gratitude for life itself, with individuals often prioritizing what truly matters and letting go of trivial concerns. Studies have shown that individuals who experience PTG frequently report a sense of joy and fulfillment in their lives that surpass their pre-trauma experiences (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Finally, spiritual change involves a shift in spiritual or philosophical beliefs leading individuals to reassess their sense of purpose and connection to a greater power or life force. Spiritual growth following trauma can provide individuals with a sense of peace, meaning, and guidance, which supports their recovery.

Despite the potential for growth in these domains, Post-Traumatic Growth is not a guaranteed outcome of trauma. Not everyone who experiences trauma will develop these positive changes and many struggle with long-term effects of distress. The likelihood of Post-Traumatic Growth occurring depends on a variety of factors like personal characteristics, coping mechanisms, social support, and environmental contacts. These traits help individuals reinterpret their traumatic experiences, find meaning in their suffering, and ultimately experience positive change. In low-income populations, the stressors associated with poverty complicate the process of trauma recovery but also provide a space for the development of the psychological traits.

Resilience and PTG in the Context of Poverty

Resilience is the psychological capacity to recover from adversity, adapt to stress, and thrive despite hardship. It is a process, not a fixed trait, and can be developed over time through experience and support. Individuals who possess high levels of resilience are better equipped to process trauma and use it as a catalyst for personal growth. In the context of trauma, resilience is vital because it allows individuals to not only survive but also grow from their difficult experiences. In impoverished communities, resilience is often found in response to chronic environmental stressors. The circumstances that individuals in these communities experience may contribute to increased mental health vulnerabilities.

The relationship between resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth is well documented. Resilient individuals are more likely to view trauma as an opportunity for growth rather than a source of permanent harm. They are able to reframe their trauma in a way that facilitates recovery and positive change. Research on low-income populations is shown that resilience is a key predictor of Post-Traumatic Growth. For example, a study of low-income mothers who survived hurricane Katrina demonstrated that resilience was strongly associated with Post-Traumatic Growth, particularly in the domains of personal strength and appreciation for life. Despite the overwhelming tragedy in loss of home, loved ones, and destruction of their community the individuals reported profound growth, including an increase sense of personal strength and renewed appreciation for life (Manove et al. 2015). Additionally, research by Almedom (2005) emphasize that resilience, along with hardiness and sense of coherence, contributes significantly to Post-Traumatic Growth. Additionally, hardiness is closely linked to resilience. Individuals with high levels of hardiness are more likely to be resilient in the face of trauma, which in turn enhances their ability to experience PTG (Almedom, 2005).

In populations living in poverty resilience becomes especially important, as these individuals face not only trauma of significant life events but also the ongoing stressors associated with poverty. These stressors burden and individual making it more difficult for them to recover from trauma. However, individuals in low-income communities often develop resilience as a necessary survival mechanism. These individuals learn to adapt to their circumstances, cope with adversity, and find ways to thrive despite ongoing hardships. Henkelmann et al. (2020) highlights the role of community and fostering resilience, noting that low-income populations often rely on social networks and collective support to overcome the challenges of poverty. This communal resilience, and turn, enhance the capacity for PTG, as individual's draw from shared experiences and mutual aid.

Hardiness

Hardiness, which is a psychological trait that includes commitment, control, and ability to view stressors as challenges rather than threats is another key factor of PTG (Kobasa, 1979). Commitment refers to the decision to engage in life's activities, even in the face of adversity. Control is a belief that one can influence the outcome of events, fostering a sense of agency and stressful situations. Challenge is the ability to perceive stress as an opportunity for Learning and personal growth, rather than the source of danger.

Individuals who are high and hardiness are more likely to pursue traumas an opportunity for personal growth rather than an obstacle. They tend to remain focused on long-term goals and are less likely to become a role by the immediate distress of trauma a study by Henkelmann et al (2020) found that hardiness was positively correlated with PTG, particularly in the domains of personal strength and appreciation for life. These individuals are able to better process their trauma in a way that promoted growth, viewing their challenges as opportunities to learn and develop a greater resilience. Additionally, research has shown that hardiness is associated with better mental health outcomes, including experiencing PTG (Kobasa et al. 1982). In impoverished communities, where individuals face multiple stressors, hardiness is especially important.

Hardiness provides individuals with the psychological tools to cope with life stressors. People with high hardiness are better able to remain focus on their goals and maintain a sense of control over their lives. Research on low-income refugees have demonstrated that individuals with higher level hardiness are more likely to experience PTG, as they are better able to adapt to their circumstances and view their hardships as challenges to be. Almedom's (2005) research also suggested the hardiness plays a pivotal role in promoting Post-Traumatic Growth, particularly marginalized communities facing compounded stressors.

Sense of Coherence and PTG

Sense of coherence is a psychological trait where individuals perceive their lives as meaningful and manageable. It is proposed that sense of coherence consists of three components: comprehensibility, the belief that life events are understandable and predictable; manageability, the idea that one has the resources to cope with challenges; and meaningfulness, the belief that life struggles are worthwhile and part of a larger purpose. Sense of coherence provides the cognitive framework necessary to navigate adversity and find meaning and traumatic experiences.

Sense of coherence is a predictor of Post-Traumatic Growth. Individuals with high sense of coherence are most likely to view trauma as an important and meaningful part of their life story, allowing them to process the experiences in ways that lead to growth. A strong sense of coherence allows individuals to reframe trauma.

For individuals living in poverty, sense of coherence is especially important. Poverty can create a sense of helplessness, as individual face systematic barriers and inequalities that limit their ability to cope with stress. However, a strong sense of coherence enables individuals and low-income communities to interpret their struggles in ways that aid in fostering growth. Of coherence helps individuals process their trauma, view their challenges a manageable, and find meaning in their suffering. Henkelmann et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of sense of coherence and promoting potion of growth and marginalized communities, highlighting that those with a high sense of coherence are more likely to experience growth because they are better able to cope with their circumstances and maintain sense of purpose.

Gene Environment Interactions and PTG

Gene environment interactions offer a framework for understanding how genetic predispositions interact with environments stressors to influence trauma responses. Research has shown that genetic factors related to emotional regulation, stress response, and resilience can play a role in determining whether individual experiences Post-Traumatic Growth. Low-income populations, environmental such as poverty can significantly impact how these genetic traits are expressed, influencing whether individuals can develop the psychological resources necessary to foster Post-Traumatic Growth.

Research on gene environment interactions suggest that genetic resilience can play significant role in trauma recovery. For example, individuals with genetic predispositions for emotion regulation may be better equipped to handle the stress of trauma and poverty, aiding in the development of PTG. However, these genetic traits need to interact with external resources such as social support and community networks to foster the development of Post-Traumatic Growth. Dunn et al. (2014) argues that understanding gene environment interactions is crucial for explaining why some individuals in low-income population are able to overcome adversity and experience personal growth, while others may struggle with long-term psychological distress.

In impoverished communities, genetic resilience may be particularly important in coping with trauma. However, these genetic traits alone are insufficient. Environmental factors, such as the availability of social support and community resources, play a role in facilitating the expression of genetic resilience. Gene environmental interaction research offers important insights into how genetic environmental factors combine to shapes ecological responses to trauma, particularly in populations that face ongoing adversity.

Religious Coping and PTG

One other factor that influences Post-Traumatic Growth, is religious coping. Religious coping has been shown to influence PTG, particularly among individuals who experience significant trauma. Religious coping refers to the use of religious beliefs, practices, and spiritual frameworks to make sense of trauma and find meaning in suffering. This coping mechanism involves turning to faith-based practices like prayer, rituals, and seeking guidance from religious leaders to navigate the aftermath of a traumatic experience. A study by Chan and Rhodes (2013) demonstrated that religious coping, particularly positive religious coping, was associated with reduced PTSD symptoms an increase PTG however, negative religious coping can exacerbate, distress, and impede growth. Negative religious coping in reference to feelings of abandonment by God, blaming divine forces, or harboring anger towards faith (Chan & Rhodes, 2013). This highlights a dual role of religious coping and trauma recovery process with implications of understanding growth and diverse population.

Conclusion

Poverty represents a powerful and multifaceted stressor that complicates the trauma recovery process. However, it also creates a condition in which individuals can develop the psychological traits necessary for Post-Traumatic Growth. Resilience, hardiness, and a sense of coherence are essential for trauma survivors and low-income communities, as they help individuals process trauma, redefining the meaning of their suffering and ultimately experiencing growth. The psychological traits serve as mediators between trauma and Post-Traumatic Growth, enabling individuals to overcome their suffering and emerge stronger from their experiences.

The relationship between poverty and PTG is complex. On one hand poverty increases the vulnerability to trauma and psychological distress, making recovery more difficult on the other hand, poverty provide the conditions which individuals can develop resilience, hardiness, and sense of coherence which are traits essential for Post-Traumatic Growth. Understanding how these factors interact will help inform interventions and policies aimed at supporting trauma recovery and low-income communities.

By enhancing resilience, hardiness, and sense of coherence, interventions can foster an environment where Post-Traumatic Growth is not only possible, but actively encouraged. Individuals within low-income populations can emerge from trauma stronger and more capable of navigating future adversity. This understanding of how poverty influences the development of Post-Traumatic Growth is critical for informing both research and practice with the potential to improve outcomes for individuals in marginalized communities.

References

- Almedom, a. M. (2005). Resilience, hardiness, sense of coherence, and posttraumatic growth: all paths leading to “light at the end of the tunnel”? *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, 10(3), 253–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325020590928216>
- Chan, C. S., & Rhodes, J. E. (2013). Religious Coping, Posttraumatic Stress, Psychological Distress, and Posttraumatic Growth Among Female Survivors Four Years After Hurricane Katrina. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(2), 257–265. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21801>
- Dunn, E. C., Solovieff, N., Lowe, S. R., Gallagher, P. J., Chaponis, J., Rosand, J., Koenen, K. C., Waters, M. C., Rhodes, J. E., & Smoller, J. W. (2014). Interaction between genetic variants and exposure to Hurricane Katrina on post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth: A prospective analysis of low-income adults. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 152, 243–249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2013.09.018>
- Henkelmann, J. R., de Best, S., Deckers, C., Jensen, K., Shahab, M., Elzinga, B., & Molendijk, M. (2020). Anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in refugees resettling in high-income countries: systematic review and meta-analysis. *BJPsych open*, 6(4), e68. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2020.54>
- Kobasa, S. C., Maddi, S. R., & Kahn, S. (1982). Hardiness and health: A prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42(1), 168–177. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.42.1.168>
- Manove, E. E., Lowe, S. R., Bonumwezi, J., Preston, J., Waters, M. C., & Rhodes, J. E. (2019). Posttraumatic growth in low-income Black mothers who survived Hurricane Katrina. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 89(2), 144–158. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000398>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). TARGET ARTICLE: “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence.” *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01
- Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient Individuals Use Positive Emotions to Bounce Back from Negative Emotional Experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 320–333. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.320>