

Commentaries

Growing Pains: Commentary on the Field of Posttraumatic Growth and Hobfoll and Colleagues' Recent Contributions to it

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The field of research on benefit-finding and growth following traumatic experience lacks consensus with respect to some central conceptual questions, and a number of these issues are apparent in the research reported by Stevan Hobfoll and his colleagues. In this commentary I briefly discuss, and at times dispute, some of the assertions and assumptions in this target article that I believe reflect these broader issues, including that: psychosocial gains (or benefits) and psychological growth are equivalent, reporting gains (or benefits) represents maladaptive efforts at coping, posttraumatic growth (PTG) is necessarily linked with positive psychological adjustment, and trauma symptoms represent poor adjustment following traumatic event exposure. I also discuss the intriguing proposal of this research: that action is essential to true growth.

Les recherches sur la maturation et les avantages que l'on peut tirer d'une expérience traumatisante sont en désaccord sur des aspects théoriques majeurs, et certains de ces problèmes apparaissent dans l'étude présentée par Stevan Hobfoll et ses collègues. Dans ce commentaire, je discute brièvement et parfois conteste certaines des affirmations et hypothèses de cet article de référence qui, je pense, renvoie à des questions plus vastes telles que: les gains (ou bénéfiques) psychosociaux et le développement psychologique sont équivalents; signaler des gains (ou des bénéfiques) représente un effort inapproprié pour faire face à la situation; le développement post-traumatique est nécessairement en relation avec une adaptation psychologique positive; les symptômes traumatiques traduisent une adaptation faible suite à l'exposition à l'évènement pénible. Je discute aussi cette idée curieuse selon laquelle l'action est essentielle au vrai développement.

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In their target article, Stevan Hobfoll and his colleagues describe an extensive series of studies documenting trauma symptoms and psychosocial resource gains, and their relationships to other factors, among Israeli citizens living under terrorist threat. Five main issues that stand out in this paper are discussed in the following commentary. Two pertain to the enduring challenge of determining the status of differing conceptions related to growth and establishing definitional parameters, two concern questions regarding the psychosocial correlates of growth, and the final one relates to the unique hypothesis proposed in this paper—that true growth requires the translation of thought into action.

IS FINDING BENEFITS (OR REPORTING PSYCHOSOCIAL GAINS) EQUIVALENT TO PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH?

In Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theory (COR; 1989, 2002; Hall, Rattigan, Walter, & Hobfoll, 2006), gains in psychosocial resources (such as social support, hope, purpose) during and following trauma were originally theorised to offset the impact of resource losses. It is the contribution of such gains to adaptation during trauma that is the central question of the present research. However, although the terms *benefit-finding*, *posttraumatic growth*, and *psychosocial resource gains* (in this instance) among others are used interchangeably here and elsewhere (e.g. Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Cheng, Wong, & Tsang, 2006), these constructs may not be entirely equivalent even though they all imply a "value-added" (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995) state, as has been noted in discussions of *thriving*—yet another appellation. In the first place, psychological *growth* outcomes only comprise a subset of the benefits that could be discerned during the course of adapting to traumatic experience. Some benefits may instead be specific to the event. In the benefit-finding literature, for example, particular changes in health behaviors and increases in appreciation of health care professionals are commonly reported as benefits associated with medical events and included in summary scores (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Cheng et al., 2006), but they would not typically be construed as instantiations of psychological growth (although an increased tendency toward finding or appreciating benefits might be). Even more generally, one can imagine experiencing positive events that occur during challenging life experiences—such as the unexpected kindnesses that people extend in times of crisis—that do not constitute growth per se, but might be endorsed as a benefit of the experience ("I never realised how compassionate people could be") if one were asked to enumerate them. Additionally, some changes (or gains) may simply reflect changes in circumstances ("I am more hopeful now that the war is over"), and although important, they too are something other than growth.

By contrast, posttraumatic (or adversarial) growth, according to its theorists (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun,

1995, 2004), represents specific positive changes¹ in one's experience of self, personal philosophy, or interpersonal connections. Nonetheless, the field has yet to reach a consensus on the definitions (overlapping or otherwise) of growth and benefit-finding (and other related constructs), and whether and how they may be distinguished.

DOES REPORTING GROWTH (BENEFITS/GAINS) REPRESENT AN EFFORT AT COPING OR IS IT A GAUGE OF OUTCOME?

Another issue vexing the field at present is whether to conceptualise the report of benefits (or gains or growth) as a means of coping (either as an adaptive mechanism or a defensive, self-protective maneuver), as an outcome in and of itself representing true change, or as something else altogether. Needless to say, each may have different implications for adjustment. It seems clear that Hobfoll and colleagues assume, at least in the studies presented here, that the report of benefits (resource gains) represents a form of coping. They state this outright (e.g. "PTG avenues for coping") and also imply it by describing PTG as being "sought", or "used", or "assert[ed]"—usage that would, I expect, seem inapt to theorists who assume that reports of PTG represent self-awareness of and reflection on past change related to living through an aversive event.

Clarification of the precise meaning of constructs in this field—their constituents and natures, their limits, and their measurements—is sorely needed. On this topic, Tennen and Affleck (2002) have concluded that, "superior measures of benefit-finding will emerge only after we are able to discern whether this phenomenon is best conceived as a selective evaluation, a coping strategy, a personality characteristic, a reflection of verifiable change or growth, an explanation of one's temperament, a manifestation of an implicit theory of change, or a temporal comparison" (p. 594). To which I would add that none of these definitions would necessarily correctly characterise all cases in a given sample. Many roads may converge at the final common pathway of reporting growth/benefits/gains, and the measures at hand do not discriminate among them.

Helgeson et al. (2006) have recently described what seems to be a sensible distillation of the possibilities: "Growth outcomes may reflect a variety of processes, some of which have to do with actual changes in one's life, some of which have to do with coping, and others of which have to do with cognitive manipulations on the order of self-enhancement biases meant to alleviate distress" (p. 812). The challenge, however, is to know how to psychometrically segregate these processes so that their antecedents and consequences

¹ Joseph and Linley (2005) also note the potential for negative posttraumatic changes wherein shattered schematic representations of self and world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) reconstitute in ways characterised by chronic impairment or maladaptive worldviews.

may be properly and confidently studied. At present, a given assessment may net a mixed catch of these processes at work and, additionally, there may be event characteristics or timings of assessments that change the probability of encountering each of them.

Presumably, assessments conducted early in trajectories of adaptation—such as those reported in the Hobfoll studies—would be more likely to tap active coping efforts (adaptive or otherwise) and acute distress management, and such responses may be particularly prominent in situations of imminent or perceived life threat, where *mortality salience* would be high and endorsement of authoritarian views and aggression more probable (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). What is unique in the studies presented by Hobfoll and his colleagues, and perhaps highly significant for the pattern of their findings, is that the assessments were conducted in the midst of the event or in its baleful shadow. The Israelis were in a situation of continuing danger, in addition to having suffered chronic traumatic event exposure over an extended period. Thus, the association between reported psychosocial gains and increases in authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and support for political violence reported here may instead reflect the effects of this third factor—ongoing threat—that prompted defensive reporting of benefits and a sociopolitically defensive posture (Hobfoll, Canetti-Nisim, & Johnson, 2006), in conjunction with elevating PTSD symptomatology. At the very least, these findings highlight important and relatively understudied aspects in growth research, namely the effects of threat and chronic traumatisation on growth and reflective self-awareness.

Additionally, adaptation to adversity is a process that occurs over time—as Helgeson et al. (2006; see also Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) observe, “it is difficult to imagine that true growth can occur within days of a traumatic event” (p. 811). The reporting of benefits or gains or growth that represent actual beneficial changes or psychological thriving are, therefore, more likely to be reported in hindsight—when one reflects back (or is asked to reflect back) upon the experience—because they are a product of coping and other efforts over time to come to terms with what has happened (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). In fact, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) argue that “growth . . . does not occur as a direct result of trauma. It is the individual’s struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of the trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which PTG occurs” (p. 5). Although benefits may be reported in the initial adjustment to the event, true growth would seem to require some progress along the recovery path.

PSYCHOLOGICAL GAINS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

There is a significant body of evidence demonstrating that finding benefits in adversity is associated with positive psychological outcomes (reviewed in

Tennen & Affleck, 2002; Linley & Joseph, 2004), though some findings have been inconsistent. Most recently, the results of a meta-analysis (Helgeson et al., 2006) of 87 studies indicate that, although benefit-finding was unrelated to anxiety, global distress, and global quality of life, it was associated with less depression, greater well-being, and higher levels of intrusion and avoidance symptoms. Additionally, time since the event moderated the majority of these relationships; benefit-finding or growth was more likely to be related to positive psychological outcomes as the time since the event increased. Lechner, Carver, Antoni, Weaver, and Phillips (2006) have also determined that curvilinear functions better characterise some of the growth–outcome relationships. These results, taken together, suggest that the relationship of growth to other outcomes may be more nuanced than previously appreciated and that examining a range of outcomes is advised. Thus, earlier findings regarding adjustment may not have been as “mixed” as they seemed; rather, a blurring of the distinctions between outcomes or the assumption of their equivalence in relation to growth may have obscured some of their consistency.

However, it is worth noting that according to theoretical formulations (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004), growth occurs in the context of great emotional upheaval due to a psychologically seismic event that seriously challenges or disrupts the individual’s basic assumptions and modes of interpreting and adapting to experience, with the implication that, if anything, initial steps toward growth would be coupled with at least some distress. In fact, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) claim, “posttraumatic growth, then, may not necessarily be ‘good’ from a utilitarian perspective—the presence of PTG may not necessarily be accompanied by greater well-being and less distress” (p. 7).

It bears repeating that distress and growth can coexist. This seeming paradox is less problematic when one considers that the experience of a highly stressful or traumatic event is a necessary precondition for growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). Additionally, Joseph and Linley (2005) have noted that the characteristics of growth map onto the elements of psychological well-being (PWB; such as self-acceptance, life philosophy, etc.; Ryff & Singer, 1996), but the factors that increase PWB may not lower distress. Consequently, case reports (e.g. Morland, Butler, & Leskin, in press) suggest that following a trauma or difficult life event one might reasonably expect to see an admixture of distress, growth and/or perception of benefits from the experience, particularly in the short term. And, depending on the nature of the event, these may persist. In short, growth does not undo the fact of what happened.

Neimeyer (2006) quotes a father’s reflection on the suicide of his son:

I still grieve and have feelings that I could have been more supportive of him so that he might not have taken his life, even though others suggest that there

was little that I could have done. . . . Little has made much of a difference with respect to the feeling of loss—the void. It still aches. Despite this continuing pain, or perhaps because of it, I have noticed positive effects of this experience in my personal life and in my work. I have a new perspective regarding things that do and those that do not matter so much in the larger scheme. In terms of my sense of myself, I find that I am driven to learn more, but I am calmer and more reflective of my interactions with others. . . . Although it seems strange to acknowledge it, I feel that I have grown in important and enduring ways as a result of this loss and my attempt to find meaning in it. (p. 68)

Indeed, perception of the full spectrum of changes that follow an event may be necessary for successful adaptation. Elder and Clipp (1989) reported that many World War II and Korean conflict veterans saw their combat experience from a “dual perspective”: that it was “remembered for its destructiveness and trauma, and also for the comradeship, exhilaration, and lessons for living” (p. 332). It is this breadth in representation of the experience that has been missing from many examinations of growth in the context of adversity.

Recently, Cheng and her colleagues (2006) examined whether both benefits and costs might figure in post-event adjustment to the SARS outbreak in China. They found that mixed accounts of the event, rather than exclusively positive or negative accounts, were associated with lower levels of defensiveness and increases in both self-esteem and social support over time; while those reporting only benefits had higher defensiveness and future decreases in these personal and social resources. Similarly, in a recent re-analysis (Butler, 2006) of our September 11, 2001 data (Butler, Blasey, Azarow, McCaslin, Garlan, Chen, Desjardins, DiMiceli, Seagraves, Hastings, Kraemer, & Spiegel, 2005), those who reported high levels of *both* negative and positive changes following the terrorist attacks, experienced significantly more PTG than those reporting high levels of positive changes but fewer negative ones. These findings suggest that assessing a single global outcome may obscure the true faceted nature of a person’s post-event condition, reporting positive changes in the context of a minimisation or denial of negative impacts may be a defensive maneuver, and the schematic complexity implied by holding negative and positive experiences together in consciousness may represent evidence of true growth.

TRAUMA SYMPTOMS REPRESENT POOR ADJUSTMENT FOLLOWING TRAUMATIC EVENT EXPOSURE

Another factor that muddies the conclusions to be drawn from PTG literature is that one outcome often included under the rubric of “distress”—the presence of intrusion and avoidance symptoms—may instead represent adaptive cognitive efforts to find meaning in the event, revise mental representations of self and world, and metabolise the emotional intensity of

the experience. Horowitz's (1986) cognitive processing model views intrusions as the organism's attempt to assimilate or accommodate schema-discrepant material by re-introducing it into consciousness until such processing is complete. Avoidance symptoms often alternate with these intrusions so that exposure to emotionally taxing material is modulated.

By most accounts, cognitive processing of the experience is necessary to successful adaptation and growth (Garlan, Butler, & Spiegel, 2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). In our study of growth following September 11, 2001 (Butler et al., 2005), the relationship between PTSD symptoms and posttraumatic growth was curvilinear. Growth increased as symptoms increased up to a point (roughly at the measure's cut-off score for probable PTSD caseness), after which increasing symptoms were associated with a decline in reported growth. These findings are consistent with the proposition that PTSD symptoms at subsyndromal levels represent processing that is associated with growth, but when symptoms reach syndromic levels—when the processing is no longer as effective—growth becomes less likely. Consequently, although catastrophic events may be necessary for growth, there appears to be a limited range of experience that can prompt or perhaps facilitate it. Outside those bounds, levels may be insufficient to spur growth or, conversely, they may be so intense that they overwhelm natural mechanisms of psychological adaptation and healing. Conceptualising the relationship in this way suggests that one must examine trauma symptoms as *predictors* of growth rather than as outcomes of growth (cf. Lechner et al., 2006), at least in the short term. (However, it is not clear in the literature, or in the studies here, that early reports of “growth” represent true psychological changes related to processing instead of coping efforts aimed at managing difficult emotional circumstances.)

In view of all this, Hobfoll and colleagues' findings of a positive relationship between symptoms and reported gains are not as surprising or disturbing as the authors apparently take them to be. This relationship is consistent with the larger literature (Helgeson et al., 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004), including with samples exposed to terrorism (Butler et al., 2005).

ACTION IS NECESSARY FOR TRUE GROWTH

To know and not to act is not to know at all. (Japanese proverb²)

The most intriguing proposition advanced in Hobfoll and colleagues' research is that growth cognitions must be translated into growth actions

² Quoted in Yalom (1980, p. 286).

for true growth to occur. This view is consistent with the existential literature on change and action. As Yalom (1980) observes in his seminal text on existential psychotherapy, "In order to change, one must first assume responsibility: one must commit oneself to some action. The word 'responsibility' itself denotes the capability: 'response' + 'ability'—that is the ability to respond . . . change must be expressed in action—not in knowing, intending, or dreaming" (p. 286).

Although Hobfoll and colleagues' findings in this context of action are intriguing (and also pleasantly existentially reassuring), it is worth noting that their true meaning may be confounded by other factors. Without a comparison group under the same circumstances but not "acting", the proposition that action itself is salubrious cannot be demonstrated. It is certainly possible that the "action context" altered the gains–symptoms dynamic or that the reported gains for this group were of a different order (actual growth instead of, perhaps, coping efforts or defensive maneuvers assessed in the earlier studies) that, under these circumstances or with this unusual sample, made a difference.

If it were "action" that made the difference, what would be the active ingredient in it? Clearly action per se is not sufficient, otherwise "going through the motions" would be equivalent. Another candidate could be the fact of the congruence between beliefs and actions in this sample. However, that would lead one to the uncomfortable prediction that participants in Hobfoll et al.'s study who voiced outgroup biases and support for political violence would have experienced better adjustment had they acted on those values. Although Hobfoll and colleagues appear suspicious of the role of cognition in growth, there are cognitive operations that link beliefs to deeds. Before change can manifest as action, the first thing one must do is decide. "Decision is the bridge between wishing and action. To decide means to commit oneself to a course of action. If no action ensues, I believe there has been no true decision but instead a flirting with decision, a type of failed resolve" (Yalom, 1980, p. 314). The settlers in Hobfoll's Gaza sample had faced and made their decision, and acted: they had stayed.

It is also possible that some other difference between this sample and the earlier ones affected this relationship or each variable independently. For example, under these circumstances there were likely lower feelings of helplessness, as well as some perception of choice (as limited as it was), awareness of committing to and acting on one's values, alteration in self-perception highlighting an heroic aspect, and satisfaction from engaging with others in a struggle for a larger shared ideological cause. All of these are emotional and cognitive appraisals that may not have been available or salient to the Israelis assessed in the other studies, and each may have the potential to affect trauma symptoms or benefit-finding or both.

In support of the view that taking action itself is a key ingredient, van der Kolk and van der Hart (1989) have noted observations in the trauma

literature—going back as far as Pierre Janet—that “the healthy response to stress is mobilization of adaptive action” (Janet, 1909, quoted in van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989), and that it is “a feeling of helplessness, of physical and emotional paralysis, [that] is fundamental to making an experience traumatic: the person was unable to take action that could affect the outcome of events” (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989, p. 446). One would predict from these clinical observations that those who take action in the face of trauma will be better adjusted (or at least, less traumatised) in its wake. Of note, however, the effect of action in this analysis is on the risk of being traumatised rather than on the effects of experiencing psychosocial gains.

Similarly, both guilt and shame are toxic contributors to PTSD (APA, 2000; Wilson, Drozdek, & Turkovic, 2006) and both emotional states include action-related elements. Guilt is thought to derive from the self-perception of a *failure to act* or acting in a way that does damage to others, while shame can develop from acting in ways that are discrepant with one’s principles (Wilson et al., 2006), such as, in this case, capitulating to government dictates that conflict with one’s deepest values. Presumably, the potential for these feelings would have been obviated or reduced in the Gaza circumstances. Accordingly, acting to defend (or at least resist an attack on) what one values and the prior commitments one has made to self, family, and community, even if that act of defiance is quixotic, should be associated with a lower risk of distress related to the event. Even in failure, knowing that one acted, that one tried, is less aversive than knowing one failed to act. (Which brings us to the meaning-making and cognitive appraisal aspects of growth and adjustment.) The present research could be extended by including direct measures of motives for acting, what actions were taken, appraisals of level of resistance, and/or correspondence between values and actions. Such information could be used to examine specific hypotheses regarding the experience of gains or symptoms under these circumstances.

Apparently everyone in the sample resisted to some extent (as operationalised by the fact that they were still in the area when the survey was conducted), so the fact of that action can tell us little about the variability in reported gains. However, it is possible that in addition to philosophical and emotional reasons for resisting the disengagement, there were other individual reasons for staying. Some individuals may have stayed to support family members or comply with the wishes or instructions of the head of their household, or they yielded to some other form of social expectations or pressure, or they believed they had nowhere else to go, or they were in denial that the State would follow through, or they were dispositionally oppositional, or they were paralysed into *inaction* by their traumatic experiences, or other reasons. Perhaps it was some of these individuals who reported the fewest gains from the experience and were also the most

traumatised by it. Conversely, these observations could support a different interpretation of these correlational data: namely, that those most truly engaged in resisting for ideological reasons were less severely traumatised and could therefore identify greater benefits in the experience.

To return to the broader issue, however, it is clear that to act on one's beliefs is to cut through defense and pretense. For the most part, when we see action spring from belief, we believe we are seeing the full integration and instantiation of that belief, something akin to Rogers' (1959) view of the fully functioning person, that "his self-structure will be congruent with his experience" (p. 251). At the very least, the translation of values and beliefs into behavior could be a marker that growth has occurred and one way to operationalise growth in future research, although the belief and/or behavior would need to represent a *change* for that individual, otherwise it could simply reflect who he or she always was.

The investigative journey that Stevan Hobfoll and his colleagues catalog, with its vital topic and extraordinary samples, is impressive in its determination to follow the tracks of PTG wherever they might lead. The terminus of this research path—that true growth requires action—represents, I believe, a satisfying existential assertion, a potentially important touchstone by which growth can be operationalised, and another intriguing road for PTG research to explore. Although this paper reflects, in my view, many of the unsettled issues and under-examined assumptions in the wider literature, it also presents important findings and challenges the reader to consider new and intriguing hypotheses.

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