

Content Analysis of Combat Veterans' Experiences with Posttraumatic Growth

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REBA MILBOURNE HOLLEY

La Jolla, California

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By

REBA MILBOURNE HOLLEY

Approved by the Doctoral Committee:

<small>DocuSigned by:</small> <i>Andjelka Stones</i> <small>F688E0302DAS43E...</small>	PhD	07/20/2020 10:43:54 MST
Dissertation Chair: Andjelka Stones	Degree Held	Date
<small>DocuSigned by:</small> <i>Deborah Circo</i> <small>F788EFC0FE7D4C2...</small>	PhD	07/20/2020 10:59:21 MST
Committee Member: Deborah Circo	Degree Held	Date
<small>DocuSigned by:</small> <i>Michelle Ackerman</i> <small>00762CA6C464499...</small>	PhD	07/20/2020 13:58:54 MST
Committee Member: Michelle Ackerman	Degree Held	Date

Abstract

Wartime can be traumatic but combat veterans can experience the positive phenomenon of posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is a psychological construct that leads a person to have a positive outlook on life. Literature exists on PTG as it pertains to terminal illness and physical violence, but not in the context of combat veterans' experiences with the traumatic events of war. The generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic content analysis methodology described the PTG phenomenon with a small sample of six combat veterans. The purpose of this research was to analyze the transcripts of combat veterans and identify themes that provide a rich, detailed understanding into a combat veteran's experience with PTG. This study implemented the inductive thematic content analysis of transcripts. The methodology provided an intimate view of the veteran's experience, which was underrepresented in the PTG literature, with open-ended interviews. This analysis allowed the researcher to produce codes for the data and evaluate and label. These findings suggested that combat veterans can experience a traumatic event and live a productive life afterwards by being open to try new things, have an appreciation of life and an increased sense of personal strength, and have a better understanding of their faith or spiritual matters. Existing research showed that posttraumatic growth can be applied to various traumatized populations, having shared the common experience of a traumatic event because the common thread is the true human experience. For future research, a larger, more diverse sample population could be used and expanded to a quantitative study to look at the correlations of combat veterans who did not report PTG and those who did. Implications would be that PTG exists, but would it mean what researchers thought it meant? This study confirmed that PTG exists after deployment and the phenomenon has been properly explained for researchers and the general public.

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This could not have happened without my heavenly Father. Truthfully, there has only been one set of footprints as I proceeded through this journey.

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Last but not least, a very special thank you to the combat veterans who were so forthcoming and gracious to allow outsiders into their world and understand their experiences. The psychology community will be forever grateful that you trusted us with your truth. Although you are no longer on the battlefield, you are still great warriors.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study	4
Theoretical Framework.....	5
Nature of the Study	6
Research Questions	7
Significance of the Study	7
Definitions of Key Terms	8
Summary	9
Chapter 2: Literature Review	10
Content Analysis with Inductive Thematic Analysis.....	11
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) Defined	21
Five Domains of Posttraumatic Growth	24
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Defined.....	27
PTSD as it Relates to PTG.....	30
Predictors of Posttraumatic Growth in Combat Veterans.....	32
Thematic Relationships to Posttraumatic Growth	34
Correlation between PTSD and PTG.....	36
Differences between PTG, Resilience, Coping, and Recovery	37
Criticisms of PTG	43
Summary.....	46
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	48
Research Methodology and Design	52
Population and Sample	55
Materials	57
Study Procedures	57
Data Collection and Analysis.....	57
Assumptions.....	61
Limitations	61
Delimitations.....	62
Ethical Assurances	62
Summary	63
Chapter 4: Findings.....	65
Trustworthiness of the Data	65
Results.....	66
Demographics	66

Research Questions	71
Evaluation of the Findings	74
Summary	78
Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions	80
Implications.....	82
Recommendations for Practice	85
Recommendations for Future Research	85
Conclusions.....	86
References.....	88
Appendices.....	100
Appendix A: Raw Data.....	101

List of Tables

Table 1 Demographics of Combat Veterans.....	67
Table 2 Number of Instances within Each Theme of PTG.....	75
Table 3 Emerging Themes.....	107

List of Figures

Figure 1 Radial Representation of Posttraumatic Growth Domains.....	35
Figure 2 Thematic Map.....	71

Chapter 1: Introduction

People all over the world experience or witness a traumatic event such as a fire, physical/sexual assault, plane crashes, automobile accidents, freakish accidents that result in bodily harm, war casualties, etcetera. As every person is different, so are their reactions to traumatic experiences. One population constantly exposed to dangerous conditions is combat soldiers. During the recent wars in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)) and Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)), more than two million American troops were deployed and almost a quarter of them returned home with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Borowa, Robitschek, Harmon, & Shigemoto, 2016). For combat soldiers, they face mortality every day, if not every hour. These soldiers performed their responsibilities with courage and determination. At some point, there was a transition in their careers and they became combat veterans. Although the combat veteran may no longer be deployed to serve their country in a war, their tours of duty exposed them to positive and negative experiences (Wisco et al, 2017). After facing a traumatic event, a person can experience posttraumatic growth (Lem, 2016; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, posttraumatic growth pioneer researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, refer to this phenomenon as *posttraumatic growth*, also referred to as PTG (Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014). This phenomenon of positive psychology (Lem, 2016) is defined as affirmative changes in one's life that is a positive, helpful consequence of dealing with a traumatic event (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). PTG is a perceived positive outcome after being exposed to trauma, facing adversity regarding health or physical safety (Lem, 2016; Martz, Hanoch, Southwick, & Pietrzak, 2018; Park, Aldwin, Fenster, & Snyder, 2008; Sheikh, 2008). From a psychological perspective, PTG is a mental

construct that develops after a traumatic event, which allows a person to have a positive outlook on life and satisfaction with life (Kampman, Hefferon, Wilson, & Beale, 2015; Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009; Morgan, Desmarais, Mitchell, & Simons-Rudolph, 2017; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014). Although soldiers can return with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), they can also obtain PTG after war engagement (Marotta-Walters, Choi, & Shaine, 2015; National Center for PTSD, 2017). The Posttraumatic Growth Research Group (2014) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte stated that veterans who experience PTG will have positive changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual/religious experiences.

This research was relevant to understanding how former military combat personnel perceive their ability to achieve and sustain PTG, after a traumatic event or experience. It detailed how combat veterans have learned and grown from their war experiences. If researchers and clinicians can obtain better comprehension of the intricacies of PTG, customized treatment could result in improved outcomes (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams 2018; Hawker & Nino, 2017). If this research was not conducted, senior military leaders may have less success in transitioning veterans because they would not know what factors can be positive influencers as veterans transition from combat, potentially resulting in long-term effects of ill-adjustment such as unemployment or incarceration (Hijazi, Keith, & O'Brien, 2015; Marotta-Walters, Choi, & Shaine, 2015; Moran, Schmidt & Burker, 2013; National Center for PTSD, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed by this study was the lack of existing qualitative literature and in-depth understanding of PTG research on how PTG applied to combat veterans, but not

from illness and physical violence, thus providing insight into their personal experiences (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). PTG is an affirmative psychological change after a traumatic life event (Martz et al, 2018; Mohsin et al, 2016; Moran, Burker, & Schmidt, 2013; Morgan et al, 2017; Park, Aldwin, Fenster, & Snyder, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Psychologically, PTG is a mental construct that allows a person to have a positive outlook on life (Kampman et al, 2015; Martz et al, 2018). This research was relevant to understanding how combat veterans perceive their ability to achieve and sustain PTG (Hijazi, Keith, & O'Brien, 2015; Mohsin et al, 2016). As the wars conclude, combat soldiers have returned home and re-integrated themselves into civilian life (Smith-MacDonald, Norris, Raffin-Bouchal, & Sinclair 2017; Smith, Weisenbach, & Jones, 2018). This research sought to identify themes of what combat veterans have learned and how they have grown from their war experiences.

Most of the PTG literature focused on populations that faced adversity and traumatic experiences regarding chronic illness but interest is growing in regards to combat veterans (Morgan & Desmarais, 2017). However, much of the research on posttraumatic growth did not delve into the personal experiences of combat veterans (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). Soldiers were exposed to low and high-magnitude stressors, such as being away from family and seeing human atrocities, and those experiences may result in significant maturity and growth, supporting PTG (Maguen, Vogt, King, & Litz, 2006; Russano, Straus, Sullivan, Gobin, & Allard, 2017). Empirical data existed in the literature but as for delving into the intimate, personal experiences of the combat veterans for better understanding, the research was not as robust (Morgan et al, 2017). The implications for this qualitative research not being done could result in continued underrepresentation and

lack of understanding regarding PTG and combat veterans, which could lead to ineffective assistance to veterans.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, inductive thematic research was to analyze the transcripts of former military personnel and pinpoint patterns that helped explain their experiences with PTG. The transcripts were obtained from previously approved, consensual, and unpublished research a graduate student conducted, consisting of six semi-structured interviews. This qualitative content analysis research identified themes in transcripts of combat veterans' interviews and provided awareness and understanding into combat veterans' experiences with PTG. Content analysis was an applicable design choice because it allowed the researcher to: a) obtain a better understanding of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG, b) discern how they perceive that they obtained and sustained the phenomenon, and c) provide illustrative themes that result from the transcripts of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG (Creswell, 2007).

This qualitative study provided an in-depth analysis of the PTG phenomenon with a small sample of former military personnel interview transcripts. These transcripts contained information from authorized/consensual combat veteran interviews that were obtained from unpublished research. The researcher was interested in learning about the combat veterans' post-war experiences of posttraumatic growth. The main construct was the soldiers' experience of PTG. Qualitative methods were appropriate for delving into human experiences that were underrepresented in the literature (Pehlke, Hennon, Radina, & Kovalanka, 2009).

While there was plenty of quantitative literature on posttraumatic growth and combat veterans, much of it did not report on their actual experiences to broaden researcher's understanding of their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman,

Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). Unlike other populations, due to the frequency of personal threats and witnessing other being harmed (direct and indirect exposures), combat veterans, like police officers, must continuously process and adapt during their work experiences. As a result, they were more likely to experience increased PTG than other populations (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Chopko & Schwartz, 2012). Sometimes satisfaction from helping others helped facilitate PTG (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Chopko, 2011.) This study was significant to the field of psychology by providing a thorough qualitative analysis, of documented words, of combat veterans' experiences with PTG that was not a heavily represented population in existing academic literature – particularly for qualitative research on PTG and combat veterans (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). Although quantitative research was plentiful and useful, it didn't offer the rich details of oral interviews, with the combat veteran's actual words and thoughts. Those details provided enhanced insight into the somewhat guarded world of combat veterans.

Theoretical Framework

The Posttraumatic Growth (after trauma) theoretical framework was appropriate for the proposed study of the combat veterans' experience with posttraumatic growth. The term posttraumatic growth was first conceived by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Marotta-Walters et al, 2015). These researchers theorized that a person can experience trauma and still manage to grow in a beneficial way, learning from the event and experience major positive changes in various areas of their lives.

The seminal work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) introduced PTG to the literature. The main theoretical components were the five main categories of PTG, which occurred after a

traumatic event: (a) a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience; (b) the shift in interpersonal relationships with others, particularly with people who have gone through the same or a similar experience; (c) feeling of invincible or fearless and/or an increased sense of personal strength; (d) having more appreciation of life; and (e) an awakening of one's spirituality, which may also involve a change in current beliefs (Hawker & Nino, 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

As every person is different, so are their reactions to traumatic experiences. The Posttraumatic Growth theoretical framework was appropriate for the proposed study of the combat veterans' experience with posttraumatic growth. It allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon by analyzing transcripts containing intimate data from combat veterans. For the review, an inductive thematic analysis was used. The study explored (a) the combat veterans' experiences with PTG, (b) their perceptions of the achievement and sustainment of PTG, and (c) the descriptions of themes that resulted from the personal accounts of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG. As a result, the researcher contributed to the literature by offering a direct perspective from the combat veterans with the personal information they shared about their experiences with PTG.

Nature of the Study

The researcher used the construct of PTG as reported in the literature and used that information to build a framework as it related to combat veterans. For this study, the researcher examined pre-existing transcripts of combat veteran interviews and analyzed their post-war lives to understand their experiences after a traumatic war event and obtaining PTG. The transcripts were obtained from previously approved, consensual, and unpublished research conducted by a graduate student. Specifically, the researcher reviewed the transcripts of each combat veteran to

analyze and obtain context to the data. Content analysis was an applicable design choice because it allowed the researcher to: a) obtain a better understanding of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG, b) discern how they perceive that they obtained and sustained the phenomenon, and c) provided illustrative themes that resulted from the transcripts of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG (Creswell, 2007). For data analysis, the researcher used the generic qualitative paradigm of content analysis with inductive thematic analysis. According to Kostere and Percy (2008), this was an appropriate choice because generic qualitative studies provide great insight into people's sentiments about their experiences.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do combat veterans experience and characterize posttraumatic growth?

RQ2. What do veterans believe most contributes to posttraumatic growth?

RQ3. What elements can be attributed to posttraumatic growth in combat veterans?

Significance of the Study

This research was relevant to understanding of how former military combat personnel perceived their ability to achieve and sustain PTG after a traumatic event or experience. As the United States winds down combat missions, veterans will be returning to the country and deal with the demands of re-entry into civilian life (Hall, McKinney, Sirois, & Hirsch, 2018; Hijazi et al, 2015; Mohsin et al, 2016). This research sought to discover and richly describe how combat veterans have learned and grown from their war experiences. Through the examination and description of their experiences, further research of a quantitative nature may be generated that could help with treatment planning for deployed combat soldiers as well as for those who are no

longer deployed. In addition, this research may be applicable to non-combat individuals dealing with traumatic events.

Definitions of Key Terms

Combat veteran. A combat veteran was a member of the military in any of the branches (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, or National Guard) who has served in combat, whether on the front lines or in an administrative or support role after November 11, 1998 (Veterans Administration, 2011) .

Posttraumatic stress disorder. Posttraumatic stress disorder is commonly known as PTSD. It is a psychological, anxiety disorder that can occur after a person has been through a traumatic event such as combat/military exposure, emotional/sexual/physical abuse, or assault, terrorist attacks, or natural disasters, causing them to feel unsafe and fearful (APA, 2019; APA, 2007; NCVAS, 2016).

Perception. Perception was defined as the cognitive process of a person becoming aware of how events or people through the use of the senses, including observation and discrimination, which allowed them to obtain meaningful knowledge; helping one to process the world around them (APA, 2007; Pederson, 2018).

Posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth was a positive change in life that occurred after a traumatic or major life event (Martz et al, 2018; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014). It was a perceived positive outcome after being exposed to trauma, facing adversity regarding health or physical safety (Hawker & Nino, 2017; Kampman et al, 2015; Park et al., 2008; Sheikh, 2008). From a psychological perspective, PTG was a mental construct that developed after a traumatic event, which allowed a person to have a positive outlook on life

(Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014).

Summary

With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, combat veterans will be acclimating back into normal lives at home with their loved ones. Although there was existing quantitative research, there wasn't as much qualitative research to delve into the personal, individualistic attitudes and perceptions of the veterans' lives, allowing them to speak freely about their experiences in their own words (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). If research could be done to understand how some veterans grow in positive ways, in various areas of their lives, it could benefit those veterans who may struggle with their war experiences. This study could assist mental health workers in understanding PTG and help veterans make positive changes in their lives. This qualitative content analysis research identified themes in transcripts of combat veterans' interviews and provided rich, intimate data that will lead to awareness and understanding into combat veterans' experiences with PTG, as discussed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this research was to examine the transcripts of combat veterans and identify themes that provided an enriched understanding of how they experienced posttraumatic growth. This qualitative research applied content analysis to distinguish certain themes in the transcripts of combat veterans' interviews, resulting in enhanced comprehension of a combat veteran's experiences with posttraumatic growth. Content analysis was a befitting design choice because it allowed the researcher to not only improve their understanding of posttraumatic growth, but also assisted in gaining insight into how posttraumatic growth was achieved and maintained (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

Central to interpreting combat veterans' experiences with posttraumatic growth was understanding the culture of the military. Our nation is protected and defended by the military, which consists of five branches: Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard. There are currently 2.15 million service members (US Department of Defense, n.d.). All of these branches participate in extensive intelligence and psychological training, as well as combat training. This historical institution has its own governing body (Simon, 2018). Military personnel are indoctrinated to accept and exemplify the organizational norms, beliefs, and codes, which tend to be different from civilian life (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011; Hall, 2011; Simon, 2018). They are trained to answer the call of duty from command, whatever the task may be (Kick & McNitt, 2016; Simon, 2018).

Service members dedicated their lives for the sanctity of safety and freedom (Hall, 2008; Simon, 2018) by following their three priorities: 1) enhancing lethal force, 2) fortify alliances and attract new partners, and 3) improve the Department of Defense (DOD) (US Department of

Defense, n.d.). Obtaining knowledge of the military culture during this research study lead to augmented research, thus contributing to the literature.

Several databases were used to review literature: Google Scholar, Social Sciences Citation Index, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses at Northcentral University, EbscoHost, Academic Search Complete, CIN AHL Complete, Roadrunner Search, National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, American Psychological Association, and the Posttraumatic Research Group at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Aside from seminal works such as Tedeschi and Calhoun's initial introduction of posttraumatic growth in 1996 and a few other exceptions, the majority were published from 2004-2019.

The following search words were used: combat veterans, combat veterans and growth, combat veterans and posttraumatic growth, military personnel, military personnel and PTG, posttraumatic growth, PTG, posttraumatic stress disorder, PTSD, resilience, coping, recovery, optimism, trauma, and growth. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research were reviewed. Historical (some as early as 1985) and seminal studies (dating back to 1993 and 1996) were included to provide a foundation in understanding how posttraumatic growth became a psychological interest, how it was introduced into the literature, why the research was important, and how it supported the theoretical framework as it applied to the general population but specifically combat veterans, as indicated in this study.

Content Analysis with Inductive Thematic Analysis

Over the years, there was a desire to construct and implement qualitative approaches to expand on results from quantitative studies, particularly those that try to explain intricate human experiences (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). After identifying a gap in developing the knowledge and

generating theories, researchers created methodical approaches to analyze qualitative results covering multiple studies, leading to content analysis (Fingeld-Connet, 2014). According to the American Psychological Association (2018), content analysis was defined as “a systematic, quantitative procedure for coding the themes in qualitative material”. For this research, a thorough analysis of combat veterans’ interview transcripts was conducted, identifying themes as they related to the domains of posttraumatic growth.

Thematic analysis. Although in the past, thematic analysis wasn’t properly defined (due to most theorists coming from outside of the psychology discipline) but in recent years, it has been considered foundationally sound and comparable with more popular approaches such as grounded theory (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019). Thematic analysis was prevalent in qualitative research and has been used reciprocally with ethnography, phenomenology, and content analysis (Aronson, 1994; Bender, 1985; Christ, 1970; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Thematic analysis involved the identification of suppositions and meanings and uncovering themes in data such as transcriptions from interviews, field notes, written documents, or audio or visual artifacts (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). As a result, the approach was considered flexible and helpful in critically understanding the reality of the data and its themes (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). A theme was extracted from a data set, such as interview transcripts, resulting in shorter, factual, and uncomplicated thematic content and may appear more than once, addressing a research question (Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

Researchers DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) have identified four requirements for a theme: data materialization, sustenance, frequency, and degrees for theme recognition based on their review of qualitative papers from the years 1979 through 1998. They discovered that 40% of those research papers offered multiple explanations of “theme”, such as detailing how data are

organized around the central topic, appearing as a methodical occurrence, and existing as pertinent data as a prerequisite for supporting qualitative evidence (Brink & Wood, 1989; Javadi & Zerea, 2016; Polit & Hungler, 1999).

Perspectives on thematic analysis. There were conflicting views on how themes can be described in qualitative research. For example, Javadi and Zerea (2016) believed that a theme can be rich or detailed, leaving the decision to the researcher on their preference and end game of either producing a rich, brief paper with specific topics or a detailed paper that contributes to the results of a thesis (Javadi & Zerea, 2016). However, Kostere and Percy (2008) theorized that themes in qualitative research are inherently rich and detailed, at the same time, providing the very essence of the study. This thematic analysis on posttraumatic growth and combat veterans proposed to explore and richly describe how former military combat personnel may have experienced, achieved and/or sustained PTG after a traumatic event or experience related to their military combat duty. Specifically, this study used inductive thematic analysis, which was an approach to distinguish themes as being solidly analogous to the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Javadi & Zerea, 2016).

Phases of the inductive thematic analysis. Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019) identified six phases of the thematic analysis process. During the first phase, the researcher established an intimacy with the data by reading the textual data or listening/watching audio visual data multiple time, taking notes, understanding the data inside and out. The second phase required the creation of initial codes to assist in labeling the data which helped with interpretation. In the third phase, the researcher used the codes from the previous phase to actively find themes in the data to support the analysis and made note of any similarities. The fourth phase involved a quality check and iterative review of plausible themes, which resulted in

some data being combined with other themes or even branching out to a broader theme. The goal was to ensure the most significant data was relevant. It should be noted that some of the themes did not only get combined but also discarded. The fifth phase was the definition and classification of themes that provided a good description of those themes, showing that there was only one focus but there was interconnectedness that built on each other and addressed the research questions. The sixth and final phase that Braun, Clarke, Hayfield and Terry (2019) identified was the actual development of the report which occurred at various stages of the process (e.g. note taking). The purpose of the written analysis was to provide a solid foundation to support the identified themes, revealing answers to the research questions.

Limitations on thematic analysis. Although thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research, there were some limitations (due to deficient analyses or unsuitable research questions, not the approach itself) that were considered (Hayes, 2000; Halldorson, 2009; Javadi & Zerea, 2016): 1) The researcher can be biased in inadvertently creating the desired outcome, resulting in poor value and validity of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006); 2) The data was used to bring forth understanding and meaning of the themes and not produce a data recapitulation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013); 3) The researcher was not influenced by prejudgments or personal inferences, which can affect the quality of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006); 4) Themes can be developed from bias and lack of proper analysis, therefore, personal bias and inferences must be left out of every phase of the analysis to protect the integrity of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006); 5) Focusing on only certain aspects of a theme can lead to inaccurate interpretations of the data; all aspects of the theme must be analyzed to ensure there was correlation to the crux of the concept (Braun & Clarke, 2006); and 6) The theoretical framework may not sync up with the interpretation of the data – the

analysis must support the framework. In addition to these limitations, another issue that needed acknowledgement included understanding that interpretation of the data can be skewed based on the interpreter's own understanding and language differences (Gibson, 2006; Javadi & Zerea, 2016). Lastly, Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019) theorized that as human researchers, it was not likely to leave all personal inferences out of the analysis but we can use discernment in deciding what was pertinent for a particular concept.

Inductive analysis in the current study. This study proposed to use the generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic analysis. This was an appropriate choice because this study explored: a) the combat veterans' experiences with PTG, b) their perceptions of the achievement and sustainment of PTG, and c) the descriptions of themes that resulted from the personal accounts of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG (Creswell, 2007). The data analysis involved exploring a data set, such as the transcripts from the combat veterans' interviews to identify re-occurring themes, meanings" (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kostere & Percy, 2008). As Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019) cautioned, the themes were derived from what the combat veterans said and not based on the interview questions. According to Kostere and Percy (2008), generic qualitative inquiry examines people's accounts of their individual ideas, understandings, or opinions on their experiences. Through the use of a generic qualitative paradigm, the research questions, "How do combat veterans experience and characterize posttraumatic growth? What do veterans believe most contributes to posttraumatic growth? What elements can be attributed to posttraumatic growth in combat veterans?" were appropriately addressed. This research was relevant to understanding how combat veterans perceive their ability to achieve and sustain posttraumatic growth, after a traumatic event or

experience. This research sought to analyze, examine, and describe how combat veterans have learned and grown from their war experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The Posttraumatic Growth (after trauma) theoretical framework was appropriate for the proposed study of the combat veterans' experience with posttraumatic growth. The term posttraumatic growth was first conceived by psychology researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Marotta-Walters et al, 2015). These researchers theorized that a person can experience trauma and still manage to grow in a beneficial way, learning from the event and experience major positive changes in various areas of their lives.

According to Infurna and Jayawickreme (2019), much of the posttraumatic growth literature was predominantly established by researchers attempting to explain the accounts of trauma survivors. The seminal work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) introduced posttraumatic growth to the literature. The main theoretical components were the five main categories of posttraumatic growth, which occurred after a traumatic event: (a) a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience; (b) the shift in interpersonal relationships with others, particularly with people who have gone through the same or a similar experience; (c) feeling of invincible or fearless and/or an increased sense of personal strength; (d) having more appreciation of life; and (e) an awakening of one's spirituality, which may also involve a change in current beliefs (Coroui et al, 2016; Hawker & Nino, 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). As every person is different, so are their reactions to traumatic experiences (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018).

The Posttraumatic Growth theoretical framework was appropriate for the proposed study of the combat veterans' experience with posttraumatic growth. It allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon by analyzing transcripts containing intimate data from combat veterans. For the review, an inductive thematic analysis was used. The study explored (a) the combat veterans' experiences with posttraumatic growth, (b) their perceptions of the achievement and sustainment of PTG, and (c) the descriptions of themes that resulted from the personal accounts of the combat veterans' experiences with the phenomenon. As a result, the researcher contributed to the literature by offering a direct perspective from the combat veterans with the personal information they share about their experiences with posttraumatic growth.

Qualitative researchers typically share the belief that the subjective emotions, cognitions, and experiences of participants can be understood as valid forms of scientific knowledge. It was important to note that there were assumptions concerning whether or not the veterans were being truthful regarding if they had experienced posttraumatic growth, which was sometimes associated with self-reporting. A researcher would assume that the veterans would be truthful in what they report as experiences, and that they are able to understand and conceptualize their experiences. Another assumption was that posttraumatic growth was only cognitive (Butler, 2007) when in reality, cognitive processing can occur, preparing a person for meaningful changes in their lives via action and/or psychologically. (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007). There was a popular assumption that posttraumatic growth and stress cannot co-exist, but they can (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007; Posttraumatic Research Group, 2014).

There were five interrelated domains of posttraumatic growth but each one can also be independent, resulting in a combat veteran experiencing all five domains, or maybe only select ones (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). According to the posttraumatic growth pioneers, Tedeschi

and Calhoun (1996; 2006) and the Posttraumatic Research Group (2014), the domains can be described as an *appreciation of life* that may exhibit itself by combat veterans feeling grateful that they not only survived traumatic experiences and the daily horrors of war, but that they are alive, have a life of purpose and loved ones to support them. *Self-reliance* may be experienced by a combat veteran feeling as though can depend on themselves to take care of business or protect themselves. *Increased personal strength* may make a combat veteran feel stronger, whether emotionally, physically, or psychologically. They may feel as though they can face anything in life and have a positive experience. *A new pattern in life/interests/opportunities* may result in a combat veteran coming out of military life and finding a new career or adopt new personal interests or hobbies. *Growth in faith or spirituality* may occur with a combat veterans' belief system.

The earliest model had an additional domain which included *changes in priorities*, which may result in combat veterans having more clarity on what is most important to them and ensuring that is secured, whether it is interpersonal relationships, career opportunities, etc. They may have a measurable increase in acts or thoughts in regards to a higher being. It should be noted this domain was a sub-theme of “new pattern in life/interests/opportunities” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). These domains were explained in further detail later in this chapter.

Prior to 1996, there was limited research on posttraumatic growth, especially with military personnel (Moore & Penk, 2019). Research in the past 30 years has been investigating how individuals respond to traumatic events and how they move forward (Moore & Penk, 2019). During this time, the researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte presented posttraumatic growth to the literature and practitioners. As it became more popular, the researchers refined their framework due to increased knowledge and constructive criticism from

colleagues (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Hobfoll, Tracy, & Galea, 2006; Moran, Burker, & Schmidt, 2013; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014; Tedeschi, Blevins, & Riffle, 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). As with most research, there was more exploration needed for posttraumatic growth as the framework continued to expand with different approaches, such as conducting longitudinal studies to identify and compare changes over time versus within one year of a traumatic event (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019).

The posttraumatic framework that Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) presented in the literature was theoretically sound and useful for other researcher's investigations of the phenomenon. There was existing research that supported this claim, such as the phenomenological study of determinants that lead to posttraumatic growth in Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans (Hawker & Nino, 2017), a case study into the circumstances facilitating posttraumatic growth (Lem, 2016), a correlational study on posttraumatic stress disorder, resilience, and posttraumatic growth among prisoners of war and combat veterans (Zerach et al, 2013), and lastly, the work of Dunkley and Bates (2015) that inquired the relevance of posttraumatic growth as it related to the recovery and adaptation after an initial episode of psychosis. Those theoretical frameworks were important and relevant, but Tedeschi and Calhoun supported their theory with qualitative and quantitative data, using their Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, which was intermittently refined as new information was uncovered (Tedeschi, Blevins, & Riffle, 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In addition, Tedeschi and Calhoun have addressed criticisms of their work in peer-reviewed publications, thus solidifying their theory and research (Tedeschi, Blevins, & Riffle, 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Using this

framework allowed the researcher to explore the lives of the combat veterans and document and understand their posttraumatic growth experiences. Thus, learning more about their opinions and ideas (Kostere & Percy, 2008) of how they have emotionally and mentally grown since serving in a war.

The theoretical framework related to this study by providing sound and useful parameters for analyzing and assigning meaning to the five domains of posttraumatic growth as it applied to the personal growth experiences of combat veterans. The framework assisted the researcher in the development of the problem, purpose statements, and the research questions. The problem statement suggested that there was research on posttraumatic growth as it related to illness and violence but not the traumatic experiences of combat veterans (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). Using the posttraumatic growth framework allowed the researcher to contribute to the literature on the combat veterans' experience, potentially resulting in even more studies being done. The purpose statement involved analyzing the transcripts of combat veterans and identifying themes that can help explain their experiences with posttraumatic growth, using the five domains related to increases and improvements in their personal and professional lives. The research questions allowed for probing of how the combat veterans experienced and characterized posttraumatic growth, what they believed contributed to the phenomenon, and provided a context to the researcher in understanding which specific elements were attributed to the occurrence of posttraumatic growth. The end result allowed the researcher to identify themes and align them to the five domains of having a new outlook on life, improved interpersonal relationships, increased personal strength, appreciation of life, and growth in spirituality or faith. Relevant published

research data from this literature review was used for a thematic, systematic analysis in Chapters 4 and 5, delving into the combat veteran's feelings and emotions, producing detailed, rich data.

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) Defined

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is an affirmative change felt after dealing with a major traumatic life crisis or an adverse event (Coroui et al, 2016; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014). It is a perceived positive outcome after being exposed to trauma, facing adversity regarding health or physical safety (Hawker & Nino, 2017; Kampman et al, 2015; Park et al., 2008; Sheikh, 2008). From a psychological perspective, posttraumatic growth is a mental construct that develops after a traumatic event, which allows a person to have a positive outlook on life (Kampman, Hefferon, Wilson, & Beale, 2015; Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009; Morgan, Desmarais, Mitchell, & Simons-Rudolph, 2017; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014).

The term posttraumatic growth was first conceived by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Marotta-Walters et al, 2015). Although the term was not a new concept in the discipline, the “systematic study of this phenomenon by psychologists, social workers, counselors, and scholars in other traditions of clinical practice and scientific investigation” (Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014) was relatively unknown. After a traumatic experience, some polls have shown that people have positive outcomes such as re-examining their lives and enhanced interpersonal relationships (Cann et al, 2011). This has been identified as posttraumatic growth by researchers at UNCC. Although numerous psychological studies focused on negative outcomes, PTG has grown as a positive, viable topic that encompasses empirical investigation and systematic theorizing and getting more attention in recent years (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007). Once

people have traumatic adversity, that experience changes their perspective on life and some of the beliefs that they had. It should be noted that experiencing posttraumatic growth does not mean that the negative aspects of the trauma are erased. In fact, people recognized the positive and negative aspects of the traumatic event. Posttraumatic growth is not just about *feeling good*, it also involves acknowledging the process of coming out of a traumatic experience and coping with life after the event.

Researchers were unsure if the severity of a traumatic event was relevant to posttraumatic growth. Some researchers thought that a person's perception of controllability, helplessness, and availability of personal resources were larger issues than classifying the traumatic event (Sheikh, 2008). A person's perception of positive support also affected the development of posttraumatic growth because if the person feels as though he or she can share his or her feelings and experiences about the trauma, and the support system validates his or her feelings, it helped him or her with cognitive processing and continued posttraumatic growth (Cann et al, 2011; Sheikh, 2008).

Although there have been criticisms of posttraumatic growth as a construct and theory being too broad and unmeasurable that Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) address with empirical evidence and Tedeschi, Blevins, and Riffle (2017) addressed with a more current re-evaluation with the expansion of the domains, many researchers agreed with the premise of the phenomenon. It should be noted that Pat-Horenczyk and Brom (2007) not only agreed with the concept of posttraumatic growth, but also agreed with Stevan Hobfoll and colleagues that there were additional dimensions to the phenomenon. Pat-Horenczyk and Brom (2007) believed that posttraumatic growth brought about not only a change in how a person perceived his or her life

after a traumatic experience, but that the change in cognitive processing also brought about a change in a person's actions as well (Cann et al, 2011).

Posttraumatic growth brings about positive life changes through coping (Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014; Sheikh, 2008). Posttraumatic growth has been documented in both genders, throughout various life stages, and among many different cultures. Not all people who experienced trauma have posttraumatic growth (Posttraumatic Research Group, 2014; Sheikh, 2008). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) created a comprehensive posttraumatic growth model that explained how posttraumatic growth occurred cognitively and from a clinical and empirical perspective. The model included the following: (a) traumatic event, (b) extreme intrusive thoughts, (c) find ways to deal with the distress, and (d) find support from social/personal network.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) reported that some researchers believed that people with posttraumatic growth have an elevated sense of their personal characteristics. However, other research showed that this was not the case, especially with self-reporting, where people tended to underreport their characteristics. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) also theorized that some people feel that their life had been enhanced with new opportunities, improved interpersonal relationships, respect and appreciation for their life (good and bad), and had a shift in their perspective for the meaning of their lives, including their spiritual life. People experiencing posttraumatic growth in their interpersonal relationships tended to find solace with others who have had the same experience. They also tended to *get closer* to the loved ones in their lives.

Researchers (Cann et al, 2011; Sheik, 2008) have reported multiple variables were associated with posttraumatic growth: (a) personality, (b) appraisal, (c) coping, (d) cognitive

processing, and (e) sociodemography. A person's socio-cultural environment could affect the posttraumatic growth, which in turn supported the posttraumatic growth definition and model (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007). Other researchers have claimed that a person's personality affects posttraumatic growth, specifically, people who were extraverted and self-confident. With the appraisal variable, a person thought there was a threat, and they controlled it. Specifically, if people actively tried to process the traumatic event by making sense of it and finding significance, they achieved posttraumatic growth (Sheikh, 2008). It should be noted that studies that covered socio-demographic variables, such as gender, age, education, and income, were inconclusive. However, the findings were considered preliminary and related to other psychosocial variables (Sheikh, 2008).

Five Domains of Posttraumatic Growth

Back in 1992, researcher Janoff-Bulman theorized that cognitive and emotional processing can help a person adjust to a new reality after facing traumatic adversity with obtaining strength through suffering, conducting existential reevaluation, and being psychological prepared (Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Tedeschi and Calhoun used that as a catalyst for the formation of their posttraumatic growth model (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). When Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) first introduced posttraumatic growth to the literature, there were five domains: (a) the development of a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience; (b) the shift in interpersonal relationships with others, particularly with people who have gone through the same or a similar experience, (c) a feeling of invincibility or fearlessness and/or increased sense of personal strength, (d) having more appreciation of life, and (e) an awakening of one's spirituality, which may also involve a change in current beliefs (Coroui et al, 2016; Posttraumatic Research Group, 2014). Since then, the

domains have been expanded to seven: improved self-reliance, increased personal strength, an appreciation of life, new interests or opportunities, new pattern in life, change in priorities, and faith or spirituality growth (including a change in current beliefs). It should be noted that one may not experience growth in all domains at the same time and there was no timetable for when growth can occur (Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015). When researchers assessed an individual's self-report of posttraumatic growth within the domains, it required the individual to: a) determine where they currently are in each domain, b) remember how they felt before the traumatic event, c) compare the before and after experiences, d) measure the amount of change, and e) figure out the amount of change was due to the traumatic event (Ford, Tennen, & Albert, 2008; Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019).

New Outlook on Life. A new pattern in life, interests, or opportunities may result in a combat veteran coming out of military life and finding a new career or adopting new personal interests or hobbies. A combat veteran may find that what was important pre-deployment may no longer be important and there is a change in priorities. Some combat veterans may even find themselves faced with new interests or opportunities, either socially, personally, or professionally. This was part of building their narrative, where they were re-constructing the story of themselves, which helped them make constructive changes and achieved high levels of posttraumatic growth, resulting in a positive outlook on life (Dunkley & Bates, 2015; Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011).

Shift in Interpersonal Relationships. Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann (2007) theorized that people experiencing PTG in their interpersonal relationships tended to find solace with others who have had the same experience. They also tended to get closer to the loved ones in

their lives. According to Sheikh (2008), researchers reported multiple variables were associated with PTG: (a) personality, (b) appraisal, (c) coping, (d) cognitive processing, and (e) sociodemography. A person's socio-cultural environment could affect the PTG, which in turn supported the PTG definition and model, however, other researchers have claimed that a person's personality affects PTG, specifically, people who were extraverted and self-confident (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007).

Increased Personal Strength. Increased personal strength may make a combat veteran feel stronger, whether emotionally, physically, or psychologically. They may feel as though they can face anything in life and have a positive experience. This can lead to the re-building of their personal narrative and guide them through the growth process (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Research showed that this also affected how combat veterans related to others in interpersonal relationships, enhancing those social and familial relationships, and how having social support after deployment was beneficial (Dekel, 2007; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011).

Appreciation of Life. Having an appreciation of life exhibited itself by combat veterans feeling grateful that they not only survived traumatic experiences and the daily horrors of war, but that they were alive, have a life of purpose and loved ones to support them. As a combat veteran, having faced life and death on a daily or hourly basis was not only stressful but also traumatic. It caused them to view their lives differently and be appreciative of the life they have in the United States of America where they have certain rights and freedoms that citizens in other countries may not have. Research showed that if combat veterans perceived threat while deployed in a war zone, there was a high occurrence of them having an appreciation of life (Maguen, Vogt, King, King, & Litz, 2006; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). It was the strongest

predictor of scores on the Appreciation for Life factor. This has also been documented in other studies that examined the factors that contributed to the development of posttraumatic growth. In a study of the prevalence and predictors of posttraumatic growth in combat veterans, the appreciation of life domain, was the most frequent domain that combat veterans reported growth (Hijazi, Keith, O'Brien, 2017).

Faith/Spirituality Growth. Smith-MacDonald, Norris, Raffin-Bouchal, and Sinclair (2017) suggested that spirituality was relevant to combat veterans because it was a “go-to” coping method during traumatic events and during war time, service members engaged with chaplains for emotional support. Many combat veterans found themselves having a better understanding of spiritual matters, having a stronger religious faith, or even establishing new a faith/spirituality. For those who were secular, it did not come across in the same manner, but they experienced “something” internally, something that was bigger than themselves. According to Collier (2016), Tedeschi has stated the model was being revised to expand more on faith and spirituality in order to be more inclusive of believers, non-believers, and address the cultural perceptions of spirituality.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Defined

Humans have been faced with an increase of traumatic and stressful events through natural disasters, violence, war experiences, and/or images. Combat veterans are a unique population who faced stressful events on a daily, if not hourly basis. Combat veterans have been trained to protect, kill, and survive attacks on their lives during combat. Stressful and traumatic events can serve as a catalyst for combat veterans to develop posttraumatic stress disorder (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018). Exposure to traumatic incidents was related to a number of

trauma-related disorders, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, acute stress disorder, and complex posttraumatic stress disorder, all commonly encountered in clinical settings (Gold, 2004; National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2017).

The National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (2016a) defined posttraumatic stress disorder as an anxiety disorder that can occur after a person experiences or witnesses a life-threatening or traumatic event such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assault such as rape. Posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms can manifest themselves in various ways and different times after a traumatic event, but the four most common symptoms were (a) mentally re-living/re-experiencing the event, (b) avoiding places or people that trigger memories of the event, (c) disengaging from people, places or things and feeling numb, and (d) hyperarousal, where a person feels on edge or jittery, often expecting something bad to happen (National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2016a).

Beyond the explicitly trauma-related disorders, many other disorders and psychological symptoms have been found to be related to a history of trauma. Trauma has been linked to diminished physical and mental health (Gold, 2004; Hall, McKinney, Sivois & Hirsch, 2018; Kampman, Hefferon, Wilson, & Beale, 2015; Smith, Weisenbach, & Jones, 2018; Wisco et al, 2017). After experiencing or witnessing trauma, it was not uncommon for people to feel unsafe and overwhelmed by emotions and various environmental stimuli. To cope, some people found themselves seeking professional help for posttraumatic stress disorder.

At the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, researchers found that combat soldiers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan had high occurrences of seeing dead bodies, getting shot at, getting attacked or ambushed, or knew someone who was injured or killed (Castro, 2009). These

experiences can lead to all types of mental health disorders, especially posttraumatic stress disorder. According to Castro (2009), approximately 40 to 50% of the soldiers in high-combat environments either suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder or they became susceptible to it. In addition, almost ten years later, the National Center for PTSD (2018) reported that during both operations, 10 to 20% of every 100 veterans since 2001 have been diagnosed with PTSD.

Current research shows that posttraumatic stress disorder can be treated with psychological intervention, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), as well as with drug therapy that includes a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) (National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2016a). It should be noted that posttraumatic stress disorder can be co-morbid. Many times, a person who experienced posttraumatic stress disorder may also have had other disorders such as anxiety, depression, or substance abuse (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018). Combat veterans experienced positive and negative events and emotions while deployed but can experience those same things at home and eventually progress to posttraumatic growth (PTG) (Lem, 2016; Marotta-Walters, Choi, & Shaine, 2015; National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2017; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Wisco et al, 2017). The National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (2018) estimated that approximately 11-20 out of every 100 veterans since 2001 have been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder. The Posttraumatic Growth Research Group (2014) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte stated that veterans who experienced posttraumatic growth will have positive changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual/religious experiences, occurring in one or more of each area.

PTSD as it Relates to PTG

Researchers were unsure why some people experience posttraumatic stress disorder after a traumatic experience and others did not. However, the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (2017) reported various factors may determine whether or not a person developed symptoms. Those factors included the intensity, proximity, and duration of the trauma, the strength of the person's reaction and sense of control to/for the event, and the follow-up care and support the person received after the event (National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2017).

According to researchers (Cann et al, 2011; Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Salsman, Segerstrom, Brechting, Carlson, & Andrykowski, 2009), pioneers Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) found it possible for posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth to occur at the same time, and that experiencing PTSD can be instrumental in obtaining PTG. In addition, those researchers found that those same pioneers suggested that there could be comorbidity with posttraumatic stress disorder; a person can have symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth at the same time. Specifically, a person can experience a traumatic event and develop posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic stress disorder simultaneously. The distress from the traumatic event can be a catalyst for posttraumatic growth, prompting the individual to process the trauma and then cognitively process that trauma differently with changes in the way they viewed the world and how they saw themselves in that world (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Coroui et al, 2015; Salsman et al., 2009).

After a person experiences posttraumatic stress disorder, he or she may experience posttraumatic growth, although it was not guaranteed. It was also possible for someone to never experience posttraumatic stress disorder and go on to posttraumatic growth. According to

Chopko, Palmieri, and Adams (2018), a traumatic experience may not produce posttraumatic growth, but the person will cognitively produce a new reality that will determine his or her degree of posttraumatic growth. If a person had posttraumatic growth, it did not mean that he or she did not experience stress or suffering, but the phenomenon itself means he or she was able to create new mental models of the trauma and relate it to his or her world, resulting in an enhanced and improved quality of life (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018). This positively affected the person's life emotionally and socially. In addition, based on the work of Chopko, Palmieri, and Adams (2018) regarding posttraumatic growth and police officer, it was theorized that due to the nature of a combat veterans line of work (personal threats), they may experience more posttraumatic growth than other populations that do not face personal threats or witnessing traumatic events.

Aside from the fact that posttraumatic growth was a somewhat new phenomenon, researchers have been trying to analyze and understand its link to posttraumatic stress disorder. The conclusions have been a mixed bag. Some researchers have found that (a) growth was either a response to traumatic stress, (b) it only lead to reduced stress, or (c) posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic stress disorder had completely unrelated outcomes (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018). On the opposite side of the spectrum, there were scholars who believe there was a positive, direct relationship between posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic stress disorder (Cann et al, 2011; Coroui et al, 2016).

Predictors of Posttraumatic Growth in Combat Veterans

There has been research done to understand what can predict if a combat veteran will experience posttraumatic growth. Hijazi, Keith, and O'Brien (2015) conducted a study to uncover the occurrence and predictors of posttraumatic growth in over 150 combat veterans who were deployed for wars such as Vietnam, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and other wars. Multiple psychological measures were administered to combat veterans for admission screening into a federal agency, the Veteran's Administration (VA), for a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment program.

Of the five domains of PTG (appreciation of life, new outlook on life, shift in interpersonal relationships, increased personal strength, and faith/spirituality growth) (Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014), more than half of the combat veterans reported a moderate amount of posttraumatic growth regarding having an enhanced appreciation of life, being the most common type of growth (Hijazi, Keith, & O'Brien, 2015). The researchers used hierarchical multiple regression and found that predictors of posttraumatic growth include one's ethnicity (specifically a minority dealing with discrimination and learning to live with those challenges), advanced mental flexibility, and more perception of moral wrong doing. Indicators such as higher levels of anger and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder tended to inhibit posttraumatic growth (Hijazi, Keith, & O'Brien, 2015). It was believed that if combat veterans participated in psychological interventions, it could lead to improved mental flexibility and present the combat veterans with an opportunity to manage their anger, while gaining a better understanding of their moral compass, thus promoting posttraumatic growth (Hijazi, Keith, & O'Brien, 2015).

Other researchers have conducted studies that support Hijazi, Keith, and O'Brien's (2015) claims of cognitive flexibility and ethnic communities as being contributing factors to fostering posttraumatic growth. Hawker and Nino (2017) conducted a phenomenological study of a small group (10 total) of combat veterans to get a better understanding of what factors or predictors lead to posttraumatic growth and found that all of the participants indicated they experienced growth in all five domains of the posttraumatic growth model. The domain that the combat veterans identified the most with was the shift in interpersonal relationships, which provided them with much-needed support. Using semi-structured interviews, they concluded that factors such as seeking treatment from a mental health professional, continuous involvement in veteran or military activities, obtaining support from their loved ones, enriched reading on topics of military life and traumatic war events, and the passage of time allowed the combat veterans to experience posttraumatic growth (Hawker & Nino, 2017). The study indicated that engaging a mental health professional allowed the combat veterans to view their perspective as evolving, as they continued to learn more about themselves. The study also revealed that staying connected to the military community and their inner circle of loved ones gave them a sense of belonging and support, even if the members of the circle didn't fully understand, the combat veterans valued that they cared enough to try and understand and support them (Hawker & Nino, 2017). In addition, the researcher found that those reading literature of other combat veterans received assurance that it was not uncommon for them to feel the way they did and that others were also trying to make sense of their deployment experience, which indirectly allowed the combat veteran to obtain and sustain posttraumatic growth over time (Hawker & Nino, 2017).

Hawker and Nino's (2017) trustworthy research contributed to the minimal qualitative posttraumatic growth literature on veterans. It was important to note that this type of predictive

research not only provided a better understanding of the combat veteran's experience with military deployment and the facilitation of posttraumatic growth, but it was also beneficial for launching future studies and developing psychological techniques for clinicians.

Non-military populations. Although this research focused on combat veterans, it was important to note that the previously discussed contributing factors of posttraumatic growth and its prevalence among this population can also be applicable to other populations, such as spinal cord injured people, the chronically or terminally ill, grief stricken individuals, police officers, immigrants, etcetera (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Chtereva, Ward, & Ramsey-Wade, 2017; Nishi, Matsuoka, & Kim, 2010; Ogińska-Bulik, 2015). The common thread that bound all of these populations together was the experience or witness of a traumatic event and regardless of where or when the event occurred, each person was faced with trying to figure out how they felt about that event and what that meant as they tried to move forward in their lives. Most importantly, these were human experiences.

Thematic Relationships to Posttraumatic Growth

When doing the thematic analysis, a thematic map or illustration with images and/or text, was used to help build out the analysis, allowing for the documentation of the main themes and subthemes, as well as any other relationships that existed between both sets of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Frith & Gleeson, 2004). This representation allowed the researcher to not only see the themes from a mechanistic point of view, but also a systemic one.

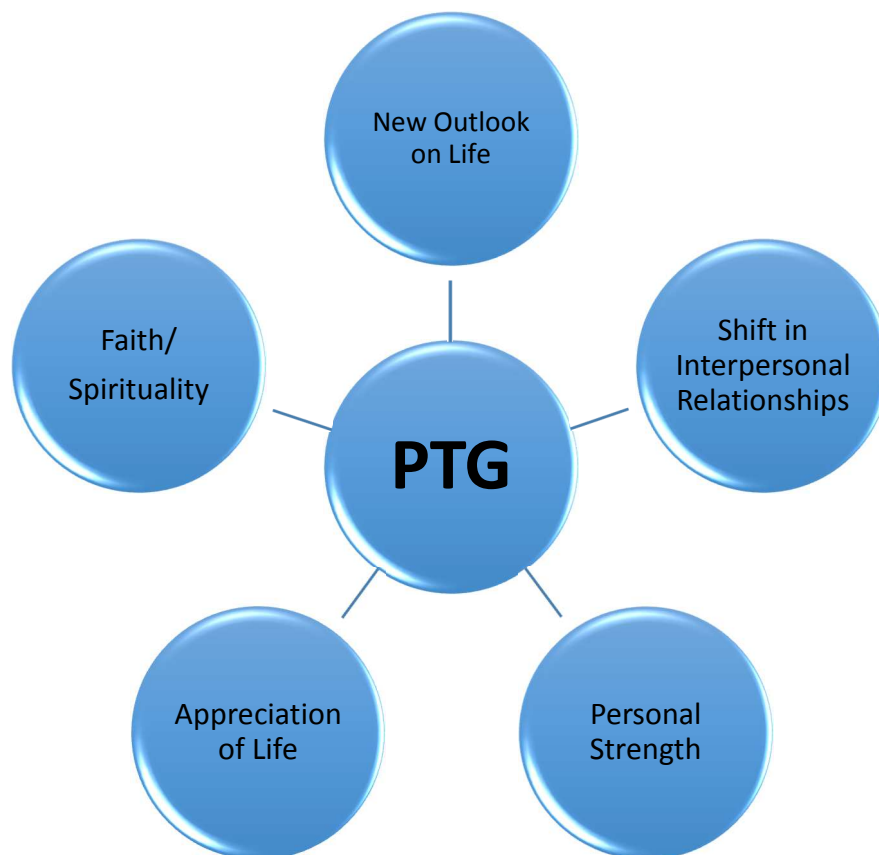


Figure 1
Radial Representation of Posttraumatic Growth Domains

Correlation between PTSD and PTG

On the surface, it appeared that posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth shared some similarities. There weren't many studies that investigated the links between posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018). Preliminary reports proposed that's one form of traumatic experiences that was more conducive than others (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Karanci et al, 2012; Kira et al, 2013; Shakespeare-Finch & Armstrong, 2010).

In the literature review, researchers addressed the relationship between these two phenomena. Researchers Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of researchers studying different populations, finding that there was a strong relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth. In addition, a correlation existed between these two phenomena, posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth, which existed in four ways: (a) posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms negatively affected a person's quality of life thus impacting posttraumatic growth, (b) posttraumatic stress disorder promoted growth, (c) they were two different, simultaneous outcomes that were independent of each other, and (d) the relationship followed a quadratic curve (Coroui et al, 2016; Levine et al., 2009).

Some researchers reported that most trauma survivors did not experience posttraumatic stress disorder (Levine et al., 2009). Research showed that some people did not experience posttraumatic stress disorder after a trauma; as a result, they experienced resilience, not posttraumatic growth (Levine et al., 2009). In general, a correlation existed between posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic stress disorder. Posttraumatic growth tends to be associated with positivity whereas posttraumatic stress disorder had more negativity. In addition,

as with many psychological conditions, co-morbidity can exist (Park et al., 2008). Studies have shown that medium levels of posttraumatic stress disorder can bring about a high level of growth, thus supporting the claim that a correlation existed between posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth (Levine et al., 2009).

Differences between PTG, Resilience, Coping, and Recovery

In the literature review, there were several instances where researchers discussed the differences between PTG, resilience, coping, and recovery. They felt the need to delineate the differences between posttraumatic growth and resilience, as resilience seemed to appear in the literature related to posttraumatic growth more often than coping and recovery (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013; Duan, Guo, & Gan, 2015; Dunkley & Bates, 2015; Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; Kunz et al., 2018; Levine et al., 2009; Ogińska-Bulik, 2015; Rutter, 2012; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007; Zerach et al., 2013). As previously discussed, posttraumatic growth is a positive change that occurs in a person's life after a traumatic experience.

Resilience. Years ago, psychologists first thought of resilience as part of a person's character make up but recently, it was thought of as an innate, insulating competency that allowed an individual to witness or survive a traumatic event and afterwards, function in a positive way (Herrman et al, 2011; Lazarus, 1993; Simon, 2018). Definitively, resilience was the psychological technique of "coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provided the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that resulted from the event" (Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, & Kumpfer, 1990, p. 34).

Resilience first appeared in the literature beginning in the 1950s when researchers studied the outcomes of children's lives when they lived in adverse environments (Infurna &

Jayawickreme, 2019; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Rutter, 1987). Resiliency occurred when a person experienced a major life crisis or traumatic event, but he or she was able to productively function cognitively and emotionally, displaying an unimpaired, high-level of psychological functioning before, during, and after a traumatic event (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013; Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019). Resilience allows a person to mentally protect themselves by making them less vulnerable to distress (Rutter, 2012). The experience did not cause a person to do anything differently but they may come out of traumatic experience. Posttraumatic growth and resilience were sometimes used interchangeably, and they were related in that they both had positive attributes (Levine et al., 2009).

There were some distinct characteristics of resilience such as having the mental flexibility to return to a pre-trauma balanced mindset, which was not present in posttraumatic growth experiences (Lepore & Revenson, 2006; Simon, 2018; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). On the contrary, posttraumatic growth fostered one or more changes in one's life (see domains) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In later works, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann (2007) suggested more correlation between the two constructs in that resilience allowed an individual to avoid being negatively affected by adverse events while posttraumatic growth was considered a cognitive adaptation resulting in high functioning after the trauma (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007; Simon, 2018). Carver (1998) theorized that both resilience and posttraumatic growth were interrelated as resilience tended to occur right after a traumatic event, then posttraumatic growth developed and built upon resilience.

Posttraumatic growth was different from resilience in that it occurred when a trauma had caused a person to make active choices in his or her life that improved or enhanced his or her life (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; Levine et al., 2009). In addition, Infurna and Jayawickreme

(2019) stated that since the beginning of posttraumatic growth's literature presence, posttraumatic growth researchers have investigated the phenomenon through numerous domains from which growth could take place whereas resilience researchers have only recently started using a similar, multi-faceted approach. According to Infurna and Jayawickreme (2019), resilience and posttraumatic growth were similar but varied on the approach such as resilience having a one-dimensional lens whereas as posttraumatic growth used several dimensional lens to gestate posttraumatic growth after a disturbing event.

The study of psychology after an adverse event would benefit from the synthesis of both posttraumatic growth and resilience theoretically and methodically by allowing the outcomes to overlap, providing deeper meaning and having research designs and statistical analyses provide data on positive and negative outcomes, before and after a traumatic incident (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; Jayawickreme, Rivers, & Rauthmann, 2018; Jayawickreme & Zachry, 2018; Robins, Nofle, Trzesniewski, & Roberts, 2005). There was agreement among researchers that there was a direct relationship between resilience and posttraumatic growth but some of the findings contradicted each other (Duan, Guo, & Gan, 2015; Simon, 2018; Zerach, Solomon, Cohen, & Ein-Dor, 2013). Opinions varied on the relationship between posttraumatic growth and resilience. According to posttraumatic growth pioneers Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), they were two separate phenomena, yet some question if they weren't somewhat related (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007), and then others thought of them as separate experiences but they were interrelated (Meyerson, Grant, Carter, & Kilmer, 2011).

Although it was believed that posttraumatic growth was the desired result, it didn't occur with resilience happening first (Simon, 2018). This was supported by a study that investigated the systemic relationship between resilience and posttraumatic growth and found that there was

some overlap in both processes (Walsh, 2016; Simon, 2018). The study explored the relationship of the two phenomena among 450 Iraqi postgraduate students who were subjected to living through the Iraq war by administering the three different measurements: the Baghdad Trauma History Screen, Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, and Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (Mahdi, Prihadi, & Hashim, 2014). The findings showed that resilience played a major role in developing posttraumatic growth. This has also occurred in other populations such as grieving adults, motor vehicle accident sufferers, and spinal cord injury patients (Nishi, Matsuoka, & Kim, 2010; Ogińska-Bulik, 2015).

Coping. The American Psychology Association (2018) defined coping as a modified act or series of actions or cognitive processing used during stressful or unpleasant incidents, with such strategies that involved an intentional approach to the incident. People who reported growth said they participated in active planning of their lives, attempted to solve their problems, and participated in social events including religious activities. Coping responses can affect the amount of posttraumatic growth obtained (Kunz, Joseph, Geyh, & Peter, 2018; Park et al., 2008). Coping variables, such as positive religious experiences, acceptance, social support seeking, positive appraisal, positive social support, and focusing on the problem, have led to posttraumatic growth (Sheikh, 2008). According to Infurna and Jayawickreme (2019), positive, intentional coping strategies can be a predictor of obtaining posttraumatic growth.

Kunz, Joseph, Geyh, and Peter (2018) conducted the first longitudinal study to discover that posttraumatic growth can be obtained through a flexible use of approach coping, avoidance-oriented coping. Coping flexibility was the concurrent use of specifically both approach and avoidance-oriented coping strategies, but also supported the idea of using other coping strategies as well. The work of Kunz et al found that coping flexibility proved to be most effective overall

in achieving high levels of posttraumatic growth. Their theory was that even though coping flexibility strategies can contradict each other, the fluid flexibility allowed the individual to not only process and understand the trauma but also avoided ruminating about the traumatic event and any of its associated activities or emotions.

Some researchers suggested that posttraumatic growth was a coping strategy that allowed an individual to identify positive elements regarding the traumatic adversity, resulting in a reconciled counter response to the event (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Simon, 2018). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) shared this same concept of coping as it related to posttraumatic growth. The basis of Tedeschi and Calhoun's posttraumatic growth model was that when an individual experienced adversity, it caused them to re-evaluate how they saw the world and how they fit in that world (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). One person experienced psychological distress that was anatomized by constantly processing the trauma and re-fitting it in their newly perceived mental models of the world (Kunz et al, 2018). As a result, this cognitive processing was a coping strategy that evolved into posttraumatic growth. This was confirmed in an empirical study with cancer patients where coping strategies proved to have a major contribution to obtaining posttraumatic growth. Researchers theorized that even though this related to cancer survivors, it was also applicable to other trauma populations (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Kunz et al, 2018; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009; Shand, Cowlshaw, Brooker, Burney, & Ricciardelli, 2015). Contrarily, when individuals used avoidance-type coping strategies, such as not thinking about the traumatic event, researchers found increased levels of posttraumatic growth, thus validating their theory (flexible coping) of opposite coping strategies working together produced positive growth (Dunkley & Bates, 2015; Kunz et al, 2018; Roth & Cohen, 1986).

Kunz et al. (2018) offered two explanations for this dichotomy. Individuals can have two different views of posttraumatic growth with one being realistic and another being illusory on psychological changes (Kunz et al, 2018). The illusory posttraumatic growth involved avoidance coping strategies and pragmatic PTG perspectives on psychological changes. Another elucidation was that both the pragmatic and illusory forms of posttraumatic growth worked together, as previously mentioned. Kunz et al (2018) believed the opposing coping strategies could work together, long-term, in helping a person make sense of the traumatic event they experienced, which was also supported by the research of Bonanno & Burton (2013).

Recovery. Recovery pertained to an on-going process in getting back capabilities (physical and mental) following illness or injury (American Psychological Association, 2018; Kilbride & Pitt, 2006). Psychological recovery went farther than restoring one's capabilities since it can be positive or negative (Buck et al, 2014) and may have had several dimensions that had scientific, communal, and psychological elements (Anthony, 1993; Dunkley & Bates, 2015). It was an acknowledgment of the traumatic event, but the person tried to *move on* from it by trying not to dwell on the incident. Some people felt that recovery and posttraumatic growth were the same. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) believed that posttraumatic growth goes beyond recovery and has longer lasting effects.

Recovery has restorative, functional and social outcomes (social can also be considered a sub-theme of functional). Restorative recovery aimed to get the individual back to a high functioning state, similar to how they were before the adversity, resulting in life enhancements and transformations (Dunkley & Bates, 2015). Functional recovery focused on a person's pre-event status but also on re-engagement of personal and social activities, and enhanced confidence, self-esteem, well-being, and outlook on life (Dunkley & Bates, 2015). Social

recovery pertained to the re-generation of interpersonal relationships and skills that allowed the individual to contribute and learn from communication with others (Dunkley & Bates, 2015).

Recovery was considered a positive and negative outcome of surviving or witnessing a traumatic event that was more than returning back to normal functioning, but involved an on-going process of re-building the social, clinical, and psychological elements of an individual's life (Anthony, 1993; Buck et al, 2014; Dunkley & Bates, 2015; Kilbride & Pitt, 2006.) Recovery assisted in re-formulating self-actualization, world views, and progressive re-adjustment (Dunkley & Bates, 2015; Jackson & Iqbal, 2000). Constructive change (growth) was the foundation of recovery as people acclimated to their new normal, finding new meaning in their lives, identifying a purpose, discovering a spiritual change, establishing new goals, and enhancing interpersonal relationships all of which were quite similar to the five domains of posttraumatic growth (Andresen, Oades, & Caputi, 2003; Forchuk, Jewell, Tweedell, & Steinnagel, 2003; Geekie, 2003; Kelly & Gamble, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004).

Posttraumatic growth served as a systemic catalyst for those constructive changes after a traumatic event (Dunkley & Bates, 2015). Similar to adaptive and maladaptive coping techniques, recovery was continuous with positive and negative experiences (Dunkley & Bates, 2015; Kunz et al, 2015). Although posttraumatic growth, resiliency, coping, and recovery shared some traits, they were all different but positive in promoting psychological health.

Criticisms of PTG

Although posttraumatic growth was a somewhat new phenomenon that was accepted as a real, positive mental health condition, several researchers had criticisms of posttraumatic growth. It was believed that posttraumatic growth occurred, just not as much as it was reported (Boals & Schuler, 2019; Coyne & Tennen, 2010; Frazier, Coyne, & Tennen, 2009). One criticism was

that sometimes a person did not have to experience a major event or trauma to experience posttraumatic growth because people's perspective on their lives can occur throughout life, and they continued living and embracing new experiences and changing their goals in life (Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007; Mangelsdorf, Eid, & Luhmann, 2019). Researchers Mangelsdorf, Eid, and Luhmann (2019) believed that someone can have "postecstatic growth", a term coined by Ann Marie Roepke (2013), by having the same positive growth experience after a non-traumatic event.

A second criticism was that some researchers believed that people with posttraumatic growth had an elevated sense of their personal characteristics. However, other research showed that this was not the case, especially with self-reporting where people tended to underreport their characteristics (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007). This was also related to illusory growth being used as a coping mechanism where someone thought they were experiencing posttraumatic growth but in reality, they were not (Boals & Schuler, 2019; Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019). In fact, Boals and Schuler (2019) theorized this may be a result of how people self-reported and the type of measurement that was used, such as the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) versus the Stress Related Growth Scale-Revised (SRGS-R). While self-reporting was intimate and provided rich detail, studies showed that what an individual thought may not match the actual amount of change, as well as not having the capabilities to know which exact traumatic event resulted in a change of personality, or persistently determine which major stressor led to posttraumatic growth (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; Jayawickreme et al, 2018; Jayawickreme & Zachry, 2018; Robins, Nofle, Trzesniewski, & Roberts, 2005;).

A third criticism was that people may think that experiencing posttraumatic growth erased the negative aspects of trauma. In actuality, people recognized the positive and negative

aspects of the traumatic event (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007). Posttraumatic growth was not only about feeling good, but it also involved acknowledging the process of coming out of a traumatic experience (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007).

Another criticism of posttraumatic growth was that it was wishful thinking on part of the person who experienced the trauma by adapting a new way of thinking where he or she were overly optimistic (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). In response to this, Levine et al. (2009) explained that “this is consistent with research showing that perceived benefits follow the trauma of victimization, growth following man-made trauma, cognitive adaptation theory, and conceptualization of growth as a beneficial illusion” (p. 285). In general, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann (2007) responded to these criticisms by explaining that growth was a unique phenomenon that required specific psychological measurements for accurate assessment and evaluation. Tedeschi et al. also noted that posttraumatic growth was influenced by numerous factors, which affected how it was experienced by people; that people used growth as a coping mechanism, but also lead to them to make changes in their lives, such as how they perceived themselves, loved ones, and the world.

The purpose of this inquiry was to conduct a thorough content analysis to bring attention and knowledge of combat veterans’ experiences with posttraumatic growth, which was currently lacking in the existing literature. As discussed in this chapter, there was quantitative research and case studies, but no research that provided an intimate understanding of the veteran’s experience with PTG. This research provided an in-depth analysis of a small sample of former military personnel interview transcripts, describing their experience with posttraumatic growth after war deployment.

The population for this study were inactive, male combat veterans who served in the Army and participated in combat or combat-related missions in the Middle East. The participants took part in structured, oral interviews that included open-ended questions. Improved understanding and expanded knowledge can lead to better outcomes associated with posttraumatic growth (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018). This qualitative study contributed to the psychology discipline by identifying the gaps in the literature by analyzing combat veterans' experience with the posttraumatic growth phenomenon that was underrepresented in existing academic literature for qualitative research on military personnel and posttraumatic growth.

Summary

This chapter discussed the process of how the literature review was conducted. It also provided in detail how posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth were defined by researchers, and how they were linked to each other. It was important to re-iterate that posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth were two different phenomena (American Psychological Association, 2019; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Zerach, Solomon, Cohen, & Eindr, 2013). Either one can be experienced without the other. A person can have a traumatic experience and develop posttraumatic stress disorder. At the same time, posttraumatic stress disorder may not occur (American Psychological Association, 2019; Levine et al, 2009), but they may experience posttraumatic growth, which will change their perspective on that experience and their life moving forward. To provide a better understanding of the growth phenomenon, the five domains of PTG were explained, as well as the differences between posttraumatic growth, resilience, coping, and recovery. The delineation of these mental constructs offered the researcher an opportunity to understand the important differences and similarities and how they promoted the well-being of a person's mental health. The key point of this literature review was

that individuals can have positive experiences after a traumatic events and that posttraumatic growth, as a phenomena, stood apart from resilience, coping and recovery, as previously discussed. This literature review addressed the criticisms of posttraumatic growth with a response from the pioneer researchers, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun.

Chapter 3: Research Method

One population constantly exposed to dangerous conditions is combat soldiers. During the recent wars in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)) and Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)), more than two million American troops were deployed and almost a quarter of them returned home with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Borowa, Robitschek, Harmon, & Shigemoto, 2016). For combat soldiers, they faced mortality every day, if not every hour. These soldiers performed their responsibilities with courage and determination. At some point, there was a transition in their careers and they became combat veterans. Although the combat veteran may no longer be deployed to serve their country in a war, their tours of duty exposed them to positive and negative experiences (Wisco et al, 2017). After facing a traumatic event, a person can experience posttraumatic growth (Lem, 2016; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, posttraumatic growth pioneer researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, referred to this phenomenon as posttraumatic growth, also referred to as PTG (Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014). This phenomenon of positive psychology (Lem, 2016) was defined as affirmative changes in one's life that was a positive, helpful consequence of dealing with a traumatic event (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). PTG is a perceived positive outcome after being exposed to trauma, facing adversity regarding health or physical safety (Lem, 2016; Martz, Livneh, Southwick, & Pietrzak, 2018; Park, Aldwin, Fenster, & Snyder, 2008; Sheikh, 2008). From a psychological perspective, PTG is a mental construct that develops after a traumatic event, which allowed a person to have a positive outlook on life and satisfaction with life (Kampman, Hefferon, Wilson, & Beale, 2015; Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009; Morgan, Desmarais, Mitchell, &

Simons-Rudolph, 2017; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014). According to the National Center for PTSD (2018), for both of those operations, approximately 11-20 out of every 100 veterans since 2001 have been diagnosed with PTSD. Although some soldiers returned with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), they also obtained PTG after war engagement (Marotta-Walters, Choi, & Shaine, 2015; National Center for PTSD, 2017). The Posttraumatic Growth Research Group (2014) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte stated that veterans who experience PTG had positive changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual/religious experiences.

This research was relevant to understanding how former military combat personnel perceived their ability to achieve and sustain PTG, after a traumatic event or experience. It detailed how combat veterans have learned and grown from their war experiences. If researchers and clinicians obtained better comprehension of the intricacies of PTG, customized treatment could result in improved outcomes (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams 2018; Hawker & Nino, 2017). If this research was not conducted, senior military leaders may have less success in transitioning veterans because they will not know what factors can be positive influencers as veterans transition from combat, potentially resulting in long-term effects of ill-adjustment such as unemployment or incarceration (Hijazi, Keith, & O'Brien, 2015; Marotta-Walters, Choi, & Shaine, 2015; Moran, Schmidt & Burker, 2013; National Center for PTSD, 2017).

The problem to be addressed by this study was the lack of existing qualitative literature and in-depth understanding of PTG research on how PTG applied to combat veterans, but not from illness and physical violence, thus providing insight into their personal experiences (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017).

PTG is an affirmative psychological change after a traumatic life event (Martz et al, 2018; Mohsin et al, 2016; Moran, Schmidt, & Burker, 2013; Morgan et al, 2017; Park, Aldwin, Fenster, & Snyder, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Psychologically, PTG is a mental construct that allows a person to have a positive outlook on life (Kampman et al, 2015; Martz et al, 2018). This research was relevant to understanding how combat veterans perceive their ability to achieve and sustain PTG (Hijazi, Keith, & O'Brien, 2015; Mohsin et al, 2016). As the wars conclude, combat soldiers will return home and re-integrate themselves into civilian life (Smith-MacDonald, Norris, Raffin-Bouchal, & Sinclair 2017; Smith, Weisenbach, & Jones, 2018). This research sought to identify themes of what combat veterans have learned and how they have grown from their war experiences.

Most of the PTG literature focused on populations that faced adversity and traumatic experiences regarding chronic illness but interest is growing in regards to combat veterans (Morgan and Desmarais, 2017). Soldiers were exposed to low and high-magnitude stressors, such as being away from family and seeing human atrocities, and those experiences may result in significant maturity and growth, supporting PTG (Maguen, Vogt, King, & Litz, 2006; Russano, Straus, Sullivan, Gobin, & Allard, 2017). Empirical data existed in the literature but as for delving into the intimate, personal experiences of the combat veterans, the research was not as robust (Morgan et al, 2017). The implications for this qualitative research not being done could result in continued underrepresentation and lack of understanding PTG and combat veterans, which could lead to ineffective assistance to veterans.

The purpose of this research was to analyze the transcripts of former military personnel and pinpoint patterns that helped explain their experiences with PTG. The transcripts were obtained from previously approved, consensual, and unpublished research. This qualitative

content analysis research identified themes in transcripts of combat veterans' interviews and provided awareness and understanding into combat veterans' experiences with PTG. Content analysis was an applicable design choice because it allowed the researcher to: a) obtain a better understanding of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG, b) discern how they perceive that they obtained and sustained the phenomenon, and c) provide illustrative themes that result from the transcripts of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG (Creswell, 2007).

This qualitative study provided an in-depth analysis of the PTG phenomenon with a small sample of former military personnel interview transcripts. These transcripts contained information from authorized/consensual combat veteran interviews that was obtained from unpublished research. The main construct was the soldiers' experience of PTG. Qualitative methods were appropriate for delving into human experiences that were underrepresented in the literature (Pehlke, Hennon, Radina, & Kuvalanka, 2009).

While there was a plethora of quantitative literature on posttraumatic growth and combat veterans, much of it did not report on their actual experiences to broaden one's understanding of their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). Unlike other populations, due to the frequency of personal threats and witnessing other being harmed (direct and indirect exposures), combat veterans, like police officers, must continuously process and adapt during their work experiences. As a result, they were more likely to experience increased PTG than other populations (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Chopko & Schwartz, 2012). Sometimes satisfaction from helping others helped facilitate PTG (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Chopko, 2011.) This study was significant to the field of psychology by providing a thorough qualitative analysis of documented words, of combat veterans' experiences with PTG that was not a heavily represented population in existing

academic literature – particularly for qualitative research on PTG and combat veterans (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). Although quantitative research was plentiful and useful, it didn't offer the rich details of oral interviews, with the combat veteran's actual words and thoughts. Those details provided enhanced insight into the somewhat guarded world of combat veterans. This chapter explained how the content analysis (using inductive thematic analysis) was appropriate for the research questions. It provided a detailed explanation of the step-by-step analysis process and discussed the rationale of using this particular methodology.

Research Methodology and Design

In psychology, qualitative research is conducted by academics and mental health professionals to analyze the speech and expressions of the human experience (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, & Suarez-Orozco, 2018). The qualitative method, generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic analysis, was an appropriate choice because this study explored (a) the combat veterans' experiences with PTG, (b) their perceptions of the achievement and sustainment of PTG, and (c) the descriptions of themes that resulted from the personal accounts of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG (Creswell, 2007; Fingeld-Connet, 2014).

The method was appropriate for the problem because it contributed to the lack of existing qualitative literature and in-depth understanding of PTG research on how PTG applied to combat veterans, but not from illness and physical violence, thus providing insight into their personal experiences (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). The research design was appropriate for the problem because it allowed the researcher

to explore the intimate PTG experiences of the combat veterans by conducting open-ended interviews which encouraged unrestricted dialog (Russano et al, 2017).

The method was appropriate for the purpose because the combat veteran population can be guarded and hard to access. As a result, the sample size was small but the research allowed for the population to be represented in the literature and obtain a better understanding of the experience (Borowa et al, 2016; Pehlke, Hennon, Radina, & Kovalanka, 2009). The research design was appropriate for the purpose because it provided insight into the personal experiences of the combat veterans and allowed the researcher to gather, identify, and analyze themes in the transcripts (Fingeld-Connet, 2014; Mohsin et al, 2016).

The method was appropriate for the research questions because it provided an opportunity for the researcher to learn more about the combat veteran's experience and present the results in a solid, research document to be added to the literature where the veterans were underrepresented when it comes to PTG (Fingeld-Connet, 2014). The research design was appropriate for the research questions because it allowed the researcher to look at the overall data set and produce an accurate conclusion about the combat veterans' PTG experience (Braun et al, 2019).

The main strengths of the study included data collection and data analysis. The data collected yielded the participants' experiences with PTG, which contributed to the existing literature. This allowed the researcher to gain a personal and objective perspective into the phenomenon/construct. The data collection method with the generic qualitative approach (structured, oral interviews, artifact analysis, and questionnaires) was appropriate for this research question because of the nature of the topic, PTG, and the sample size. The researcher

was able to explore the lives of the combat veterans and understand their experiences of coming out of a traumatic experience and obtaining posttraumatic growth.

The data analysis process allowed the researcher to think critically about the synthesis of the patterns and themes (Fingeld-Connet, 2014). The analysis produced an unbiased objective of the combat veterans' experiences with posttraumatic growth. The data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis, involving the examination of a data set to identify multiple occurrences of patterns and/or themes (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Javadi & Zarea, 2016; Kostere & Percy, 2008).

The inductive thematic analysis approach allowed for the review of completed interviews of combat veterans and to examine documents and other personal artifacts that provided additional content and context to the data. The thematic analysis process allowed the researcher to become familiar with the data, generate codes for the data, identify and review themes, and define and name themes to produce a solid document that accurately described each participants experience with PTG (Fingeld-Connet, 2014). Content analysis with an inductive thematic was an appropriate methodology and design for this study because allowed the researcher to delve into the intimate, personal details of the combat veterans' experience with posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event or experience related to their military combat duty, ultimately resulting in providing the answers to the study's research questions. This approach was especially helpful in identifying and categorizing the themes as they related to the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). In addition, there was no risk of traumatizing the combat veterans as only their transcripts were used for data collection.

Although many methodologies were researched before content analysis with inductive thematic analysis was chosen, there was one in particular that closely aligns with the existing

methodology but was not appropriate: phenomenological study with inductive thematic analysis. The biggest reason why this was not an appropriate choice was ethics-related. Although the focus was on posttraumatic growth, there were three major concerns that were identified: 1) re-traumatizing the participants and 2) the potential for the researcher experiencing secondary PTSD from graphic material that may come out of interviewing, analyzing the data, and reviewing war-related documents. A third factor not ethically-related was participant recruitment of a guarded population, which explained why many qualitative studies in the literature review had small (5-25) samples. Correlational or case studies were applicable if the research questions focused on causality, comparisons, and the like, but only content analysis allowed for rich, descriptive data provided directly from the combat veteran.

Population and Sample

Combat veterans deployed to the Middle East for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom were the population used for this study. This population was typically males of African and Caucasian descent from various socio-economic backgrounds. The population for this study represented the following branches of military: Army, Navy and Air Force. Many were college educated with an average age of 39.

The sample for this study was a small (6) set of combat veterans' transcripts who served with any branch of the military, such as the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Reserves. Their duties were on the front lines or in an administrative or support role. The transcripts were obtained from a graduate student who conducted the interviews for a different research project that was never published. Data saturation was not an issue as there is a limited amount of transcripts. In addition, the inductive thematic analysis was designed to capture redundancy/themes by clustering information. The sample included male veterans who served in

the military and participated in combat or combat-related missions. Inclusive criteria included military service, experience in combat on the front lines or in an administrative or support role, and experience of PTG. Exclusion criteria included participants without military experience in a war and no outcomes of PTG. Criteria such as race, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, geographic background, or statute of limitations for PTG experiences will not be excluded. According to researchers (Kostere & Percy, 2008; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Patton, 2002), the sample size may vary with qualitative studies. It often depends on the phenomenon that is being studied, how the sample size provided credibility, and how the researcher used their resources (Patton, 2002).

The generic qualitative approach allowed the researcher to use interview transcripts of combat veterans to provide content and context to the data. Researchers stated (Kostere & Percy, 2008; Moser & Korstjens, 2018), it would be acceptable to use a profoundly knowledgeable, albeit small, sample to obtain resonant and deep information about a specific topic. The researcher explored the lives of the combat veterans and documents to understand their posttraumatic growth experiences to learn more about their opinions and ideas of how they emotionally and mentally grew since serving in the war, the overall essence of their experience (Kostere & Percy, 2008; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

The sampling guidelines regarding confidentiality for content analysis with the generic qualitative approach were followed. To ensure ethical guidelines were followed in this research study, the confidentiality of the combat veterans' identity and the content of the transcripts were secured via an external portable storage device (e.g. thumb drive) that was locked in a drawer. Any identifying information was redacted. In addition, a review of the APA Code of Ethics was

previewed prior to the data collection, which aided in research planning to help identify other potential pitfalls.

Materials

Combat veteran transcripts (hardcopies and softcopies) and signed consent forms were obtained from a graduate student who conducted the interviews for a different research project, which was never been published. The data was collected for previous research using open-ended, live streamed interviews via Skype. The interviews contained guided questions. All documents were in Microsoft Word format. In addition, all materials were locked physically, in a file cabinet. The softcopies were stored on an encrypted portable storage device (ex: thumb drive, etc.).

Study Procedures

Transcripts of combat veterans were obtained from previous research that was not finalized or published. There were a total of six transcripts. All were used for content analysis. The researcher used an inductive thematic analysis to identify themes and review for interrelatedness among each theme as they appeared in the written transcripts. Step-by-step details were provided in the following section.

Data Collection and Analysis

In psychological research, qualitative data tends to not be as robust and plentiful as quantitative data, but the qualitative data does provide researchers a glimpse into the personal experiences of the study participants and creates a legitimate platform to profile a guarded and/or disenfranchised group of people who may lack representation in the literature experience (Frost & Ouellette, 2011; Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, & Suarez-Orozco, 2018). Data

was collected from previous research that included verbatim transcripts of combat veterans that participated in semi-structured interviews that delved into their personal experiences with posttraumatic growth after deployment and leaving the military.

After collecting data from the interview transcripts, the data was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis with constant comparison. The researcher reviewed and became familiar with the participant interviews. During this time, the researcher noted any meaningful content such as phrases, sentences, and sentiments (Fingeld-Connet, 2014). The analysis was broken up into the following five sections:

1. **Meaning Unit Identification:** After becoming familiar with the transcripts, highlighted information was reviewed and compared to the research questions to determine if there was relevance. It should be noted that there may have been interesting information gathered that was not related to the research questions (Kostere & Percy, 2008).
2. **Relevance:** The researcher gathered the unrelated content and stored it separately for reference at a later time.
3. **Clustering:** At this point, the researcher took the data and labeled them with codes. Then, the researcher clustered related data and developed patterns for the first participant's transcript. Each research participant's transcript was analyzed and compared with the previous data. The researcher compared and contrasted all of the data, resulting in continuous comparison. All data was identified and grouped with the corresponding pattern and direct quotes taken from the interviews and artifacts to clarify the pattern via manual coding and clustering. Manual clustering allowed the researcher to become even more intimate with the data.

4. Themes: Once the patterns were identified, they were sought out by bringing together those patterns and turning them into themes. Kostere and Percy (2008) explained that the researcher should be aware that patterns and themes may change during the analysis (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Next, the researcher composed a thorough analysis describing the essence of each theme.
5. Synthesis: Finally, the researcher took the supporting quotes from the collected data (transcripts) to synthesize them together to support the research question.

To analyze the data and answer the research questions, the researcher thoroughly read each transcript to ensure accuracy of the data. Each transcript was read a second time to ensure familiarity for the researcher. Pertinent content was flagged for code and theme assignment and reviewed for mapping to the appropriate themes. Next, the researcher conducted a refinement of the identified themes. The content was put in various categories that have similar characteristics or meaning with direct quotes and running topics being grouped together. The data was analyzed again for main themes to assist the researcher in creating detailed narratives that was derived from the participants' quotes. Finally, the themes were compiled to address the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do combat veterans experience and characterize posttraumatic growth?
- RQ2. What do veterans believe most contributes to posttraumatic growth?
- RQ3. What elements can be attributed to posttraumatic growth in combat veterans?

Overall, the generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic analysis approach allowed for the use of interviews with each combat veteran and for the review of documents and

other personal artifacts that lent additional content and context to the data. The thematic analysis process occurred in three stages: (a) describing, (b) organizing, and (c) connecting, which led to “working back and forth between the themes until a comprehensive set of themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 39, Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Inductive analysis allowed the researcher to build themes from the ground up (Patton, 2002). The final product was a professionally written description of the combat veterans’ experiences of posttraumatic growth, which included narratives and individual quotes.

The data presentation offered a brief description on the purpose and background of the research. Then, it described how the data unfolded during the study, which involved the identification of themes from the transcripts, all supported by the knowledge obtained from the literature review. This flexible approach using inductive thematic analysis allowed the data to be documented in a thematic map (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). First, a discussion occurred of the patterns of experience, including themes from the participant’s interviews. This may be found with recurring words or phrases. Fischer et al (2009) explained that these patterns create “the first level of thematic analysis and are derived from and supported by direct quotes and first person passages that correspond to each identified pattern” (p. 80). Second, the patterns will be clustered together based on their themes. Then the researcher used the data from the participants to provide meaning of the patterns. Third, the researcher synthesized the patterns and themes to form a merged description of the research questions. As this synthesis occurred, a more detailed meaning was explicated.

In collecting the data, the researcher collected and inventoried each transcript to learn more about the participants’ experiences and how they arrived at PTG. Because the researcher

did not have any personal experience with this type of PTG and only analyzed the transcripts, the validity of the study was not compromised.

Assumptions

Qualitative researchers typically share the belief that the subjective emotions, cognitions, and experiences of participants can be understood as valid forms of scientific knowledge. To refrain from making generalizations and prejudgments before data can be collected, assumptions were not identified, which allowed for uninhibited critical thinking and openness to the phenomenon/construct being researched (Creswell, 2007; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). However, it was important to note that there were assumptions concerning whether or not the veterans were truthful regarding if they had experienced PTG. The researcher assumed that the veterans were truthful in what they reported as experiences, and that they understood and conceptualized their experiences.

Limitations

Some limitations of the research design plan included the small sample size and the potential field issue of access to potential participants. These two limitations went hand-in-hand. The small sample size was possibly due to the challenge of gaining access to combat veterans. The only way to improve the sample size was to gain access to participants through the Department of Veteran Affairs or the Department of Defense, which was unlikely. To mitigate the limitation of a small sample size, the researcher attempted to acquire additional combat veteran transcripts from other studies.

Delimitations

As this research study had limitations, it also had delimitations, which were boundaries set in place by the researcher, prior to the start of the study, to ensure accuracy and limit extraneous activities that may or may not answer the researcher's questions. For this study, delimitation for this study was the population. This study focused on the individual posttraumatic growth experiences of the combat veterans and not their immediate family members such as parents, spouses, and children. It only included veterans that have participated in the Middle East wars (ex: Operation Enduring Freedom) that spun off from the attacks of September 11, 2001 on American soil. As a result, the data was not applicable to the investigations into how the combat veteran's posttraumatic growth experience is perceived by those who have a close, personal relationship with them. It also did not address the long-term effects of posttraumatic growth. Lastly, the researcher wasn't in communication with the participants to follow up on the responses they provided during the interview. This aligns with the content analysis approach of only interpreting data that was collected or provided.

Ethical Assurances

Since the data collected already existed in transcript form, the following ethical assurances were guaranteed: a) safe, secure storage of the transcripts; b) proper consent was obtained from the participants; c) any identifying information was excluded; and d) the transcripts were only used for academic work efforts. Before any data was collected, the study obtained approval from Northcentral's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Since there was no contact with the combat veterans who participated in the interviews, there was no risk to them.

To ensure the confidentiality and safe storage of the transcripts, hardcopies were placed in a desk drawer that contained a key for locking and unlocking the drawer. Softcopies were in the same drawer, saved to an external storage device. The researcher ensured that all consent forms for the interviews are signed and stored in the same location as the transcripts and external storage device. The transcripts and research notations did not have any identifying information. Each participant was assigned a number (ex: Research Participant #5 or RP #5) for reference throughout the study. The researcher understood the goals and objectives of this qualitative study, particularly selecting the applicable methodology, collecting the data, and knowing how to analyze the data (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Javadi & Zarea, 2016; Kostere & Percy, 2008). During the analysis, the researcher was alert and attentive to the identified themes and sub-themes, the combat veteran's personal experience, and used critical and analytical thinking.

Summary

Traumatic events happen all around the world. Combat veterans may have experienced or witnessed traumatic events while being deployed, serving their country. Researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) believed that a person can learn from that event and have a positive changes in their lives, manifesting as posttraumatic growth (PTG). The researcher expected to find that each of the combat veterans was affected by various factors that attributed to them experiencing PTG. These factors included age, culture, race, gender, social networks, familial environments, personal interests/hobbies, faith/religion, and therapeutic care. Each combat veteran may process their military experiences differently and the previously mentioned factors may influence that process of growing out of a traumatic experience. As a result, the researcher hoped to find overarching themes to be useful in helping mental health and military professionals get a better

understanding of PTG and potentially develop treatment plans for not only combat veterans, but other populations as well.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to shine a light on former military personnel and their experiences with PTG after living through a traumatic experience. This chapter provided information on the trustworthiness of the data, the results, the research questions, and an evaluation of the findings. It discussed the step-by-step process of how the data was analyzed. Lastly, it summarized the interviews of each research participant and described the major themes identified with the research participant. The inductive thematic analysis approach allowed for the content analysis of transcripts. The thematic analysis process allowed the researcher to generate codes for the data, identify and review themes, and define and name themes to produce a solid document that accurately described each participants experience with PTG.

Trustworthiness of the Data

This research sought to provide insight into the experiences of former military personnel and their experiences with PTG. For data analysis, the researcher used the generic qualitative paradigm of content analysis with inductive thematic analysis. According to Kostere and Percy (2008), this was an appropriate choice because generic qualitative studies provide great insight into people's sentiments about their experiences. This qualitative study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability, which were considered the criteria for trustworthiness in data and align with the better known terms, validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). To ensure credibility, the transcripts were printed and reviewed two separate times to allow for a fresh perspective and new identifications without influence from previous notes. The transferability of the data was present in that the rich descriptions of the combat veterans' posttraumatic growth experiences can be applied to other populations, such as chronically ill patients, car accident survivors, sexual assault survivors and

bereavement (Chtereva, Wade, & Ramsey-Wade, 2017; Oginska-Bulik, 2015; Shakespeare-Finch & Armstrong, 2010). To establish dependability, the analysis was well-organized and done in a way to be repeatable by identifying clear, separate themes. Lastly, the data obtained confirmability once the previously mentioned criteria were achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Nowell et al, 2017).

Results

The generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic analysis methodology described the posttraumatic growth phenomenon with a small sample of six participants who had served in the military. The researcher was interested in understanding the combat veterans' experiences of posttraumatic growth after serving their country in a war. This study affirmed the major themes of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) seminal work on the posttraumatic growth model: self-reliance, increased personal strength, appreciation of life, new interests/opportunities, growth driven by faith/spirituality, change in priorities, and new pattern in life.

Demographics

The general characteristics of the participants at the time of data collection are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Demographics of Combat Veterans

	Race	Gender	Military Branch	Geography	Marital Status	Field of Occupation
Participant #10	White	Male	Navy	Southeastern US	Divorced/ Re-Married	Gov't Employee
Participant #11	White	Male	Air Force	Western US	Married	Law Enforcement
Participant #14	Black	Male	Army	Mid-Atlantic US	Married	School Administrator
Participant #15	White	Male	Army	Mid-Atlantic US	Married	Bank/Finance Manager
Participant #18	White	Male	Army	Mid-Atlantic US	Married	Business Manager/ Entrepreneur
Participant #21	White	Male	Army	Africa	Married	Missionary/ Minister

How Combat Veterans Experience and Characterize Posttraumatic Growth

A combat veteran had experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a car accident. He experienced growth in all domains, with his biggest areas of growth in the following areas: (a) a change in priorities, (b) a greater appreciation of life, (c) a greater feeling of self-reliance, (d) a better understanding of spiritual matters, (e) counting on others in tough times, (f) a new path in life, (g) closeness to others, (h) expressing his emotions, (i) handling difficulties, (j) doing better things with his life, (k) having a better appreciation of each day, and (l) putting more effort into his relationships. He believed that as a result of his service in the military and the car accident, which happened Stateside, his life had been changed. This combat veteran also learned that he had to respect people more because it is unknown how long they will be in your life. In addition, he developed new interests such as cooking and woodworking. He

also made efforts to attend mass at least once or twice a month. He learned to forgive and move on with his life. He was open to new opportunities, personally (re-marrying) and professionally (building a civilian career while still working for the government). He was not jaded by his experiences or the military.

A combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq. He experienced growth in a couple of the domains with the biggest growth in the following areas: (a) greater appreciation of life and (b) greater feeling of self-reliance. It should also be noted that he revealed that he saw an increase in his willingness to express his emotions, doing better things with his life, better appreciating each day, and being more likely to change things which need changing. Prior to his participation on this study, he was unaware of PTG although he knew that he had changed in some ways. He is a private person and does not feel the need to verbalize his thoughts with others, including his wife.

The researcher believed this combat veteran has learned to cope with his traumatic experience and experienced PTG, but not necessarily in a positive way. This veteran appeared guarded and matter-of-fact-like in his transcripts, which provided a contrast to the other participants. In addition, this participant did not experience as much growth as the other participants because of the nature of his personality and existing mental models of being stoic and potentially, unavailable emotionally. However, to prove this, more research would need to be done.

A combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq, in all domains but his strongest growth included: (a) having had a greater appreciation of life and each day, (b) having had a better understanding of spiritual matters, (c)

having had a new path for his life, (d) been more willing to express his emotions, (e) recognized personal strength, and (f) learned how wonderful people are.

Participant #14 felt as though it was an honor to serve. He viewed himself as highly adaptable to people and the environment. After serving, his new path was to go into education. In addition, he found that although he was a believer of Christianity, he did not acknowledge spirituality, which he now has a result of his deployment. Based on the transcript, the researcher believed that this combat veteran struggled the most with understanding what he did and why he did it. His PTG has allowed him to accept his role in the war and move on to a meaning career in secondary education.

A combat veteran has experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. He experienced PTG in all domains but his biggest growth occurred in the following areas: (a) changed priorities, (b) a greater appreciation for life and each day, (c) having a better understanding of spiritual matters, (d) having a new path for his life, (e) accepting the way things work out, (f) having new opportunities present themselves, and (g) having stronger religious faith. This participant experienced a great deal change and growth. His deployment made him keenly aware of his responsibility as a parent. Initially, his identity was wrapped around his life as a soldier. He has re-kindled is old interests and found new ones such as camping, hiking, and hunting. He feels his most prolific growth pertained to his spiritual life.

A combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq. He experienced growth in several domains, with the most growth occurring in the

following areas: (a) new interests and path in life, (b) change things that need changing, (c) appreciation of life, and (d) feeling stronger than he thought.

Although this participant was greatly affected by the birth of his children, becoming an entrepreneur, and deciding to go to graduate school, one of the most changes in growth pertains to the awakening of his spirituality.

A combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq. This participant experienced PTG in several domains with the most significant growth in the following areas: (a) greater appreciation of life, (b) better understanding of spiritual matters, (c) new path in life, (d) greater sense of closeness with others, (e) better handle difficulties, and (f) stronger religious faith. The post-traumatic growth caused a personality change, from carefree to more serious. His combat experiences also brought about a change in how he approaches life's challenges. The most significant growth occurred with his faith and spirituality. During his deployment, he found himself seeking comfort in his faith and he ended up mentoring other soldiers with prayer and readings.

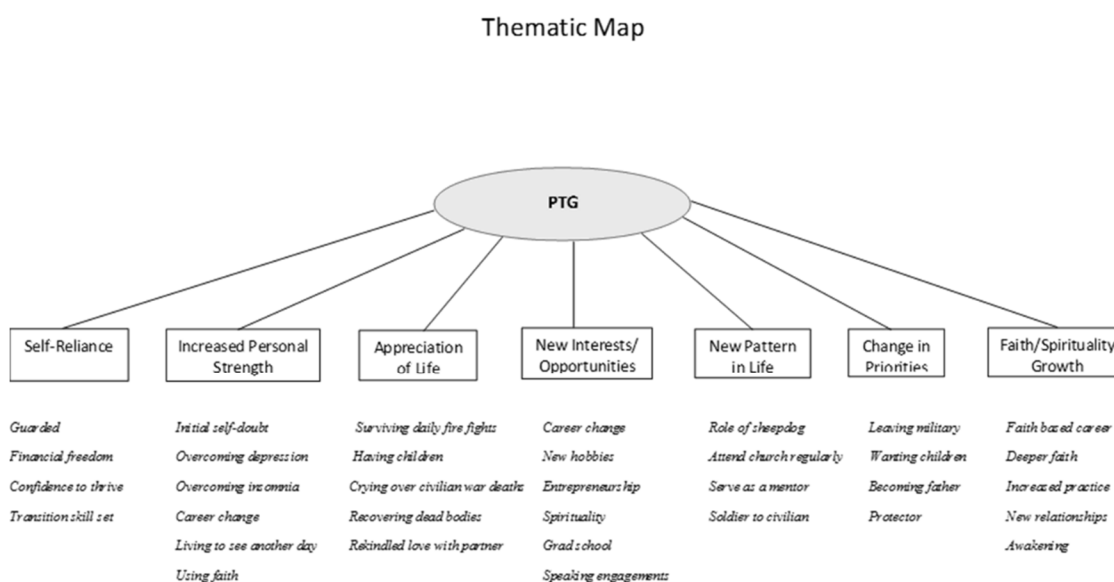
What Veterans Believe Most Contributes to Posttraumatic Growth

The veterans mostly believed that the overall deployment experience initiated the posttraumatic growth they achieved post-deployment. Based on the data, the veterans saw overall improvements or enhancements to at least one area of their lives. Additional details are located in Appendix A: Raw Data.

What Elements Attributed to Posttraumatic Growth in Combat Veterans

Various elements attributed to the posttraumatic growth in combat veterans. Each domain discussed explores the shared experiences of the veterans. Based on Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2011) structure of PTG, the thematic map below displays the combat veterans experiences within each domain:

Figure 2
Thematic Map



Research Questions

Through the use of a generic qualitative paradigm, the following research questions were appropriately addressed and align with all of the PTG themes:

RQ1. How do combat veterans experience and characterize posttraumatic growth?

RQ2. What do veterans believe most contributes to posttraumatic growth?

RQ3. What elements can be attributed to posttraumatic growth in combat veterans?

The researcher identified major themes after collecting data and analyzing each participant's interview. (Raw data is presented in Appendix 1). As each participant shared his experiences of post-traumatic growth, seven themes were identified: self-reliance, increased personal strength, appreciation of life, new interests/opportunities, growth driven by faith/spirituality, change in priorities, and new pattern in life.

To analyze the data, the researcher completed the following steps:

- All transcripts were thoroughly read to ensure accuracy of the data.
- Each transcript was read and printed twice to ensure familiarity for the researcher. Pertinent content was flagged for code and theme assignment.
- Flagged content was reviewed for mapping to the appropriate themes.
- A review and refinement of the identified themes were conducted.
- The content was put in various categories that had similar characteristics or meaning.
- Direct quotes and running topics were grouped together.
- The data were again analyzed for main themes. As a result, the researcher was able to create detailed narratives that were derived from the participants' quotes.
- Finally, the themes were compiled to address the research questions.

Self-Reliance. This theme related to the third PTG domain of feeling invincible or fearless and/or having an increased sense of personal strength. Research Participant #11 had become self-reliant by being more guarded. He stated that his circle of friends was quite small. He said, "I don't have faith in a lot of people." Participant #18 stated, "I do have a greater sense of self-reliance. I have proven myself in battle and in leadership positions. I have sound decision making skills that will make me successful."

Increased Personal Strength. This theme related to the third PTG domain of feeling invincible or fearless and/or an increased sense of personal strength. Research Participant #14 once questioned his decision to serve his country because deployment and fighting in a war changed his perspective a little. He said, “Being thrust into an unfamiliar situation, especially combat situations, things become a lot more clear and you wonder if you made the right decision. I went through some of that myself...myself being adaptable, I managed to work through the times and do what I had to do.” Another veteran, Research Participant #21, stated, “After you’ve lived in a place for a year where people are trying to kill you all the time, everything else in life seems pretty easy.”

Appreciation of Life. This theme related to the fourth PTG domain of having more appreciation of life. Research Participant #15 stated that he experienced a new appreciation right after the birth of his first child. He said, “Just sitting there holding this little baby in my arms there at the Army hospital there at Fort Campbell—right there I felt in my heart there was no way I was going back to Iraq.”

New Interests/Opportunities. This theme related to the first PTG domain of developing a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience. Prior to being deployed to Iraq, Research Participant #15 felt his career as a soldier defined him. He said, “My old identity was wrapped into soldier life. Before my combat experience in Iraq, my focus in life was a career in the Army. I saw myself serving 20-plus years, but that changed drastically after Iraq.” Now, this veteran has a corporate career in the financial industry.

Growth Driven by Spirituality/Faith. This theme related to the fifth PTG domain of having one’s spirituality awakened, which may also involve a change in current beliefs.

Research Participant #18 said he was not a Christian, not a believer, “until a year after I came back from Iraq and got out of the military.” At the time of data collection, this veteran had a side business that incorporated his faith and beliefs.

Change in Priorities. This theme related to the first PTG domain of developing a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience. Research Participant #21 said that when he was in Iraq, “that was when I decided that I would be a pastor, that was what I was really supposed to do with my life.” Research Participant # 18 was married when he deployed, and he came back home to a 2-month old daughter, and “that changed my perspective on things a little bit.”

New Path in Life. This theme related to the first PTG domain of developing a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience. Research Participant #14 revealed that he was told on “many occasions that he will be working with children.” After leaving the military, he went directly into education. He stated it was a “natural progression.”

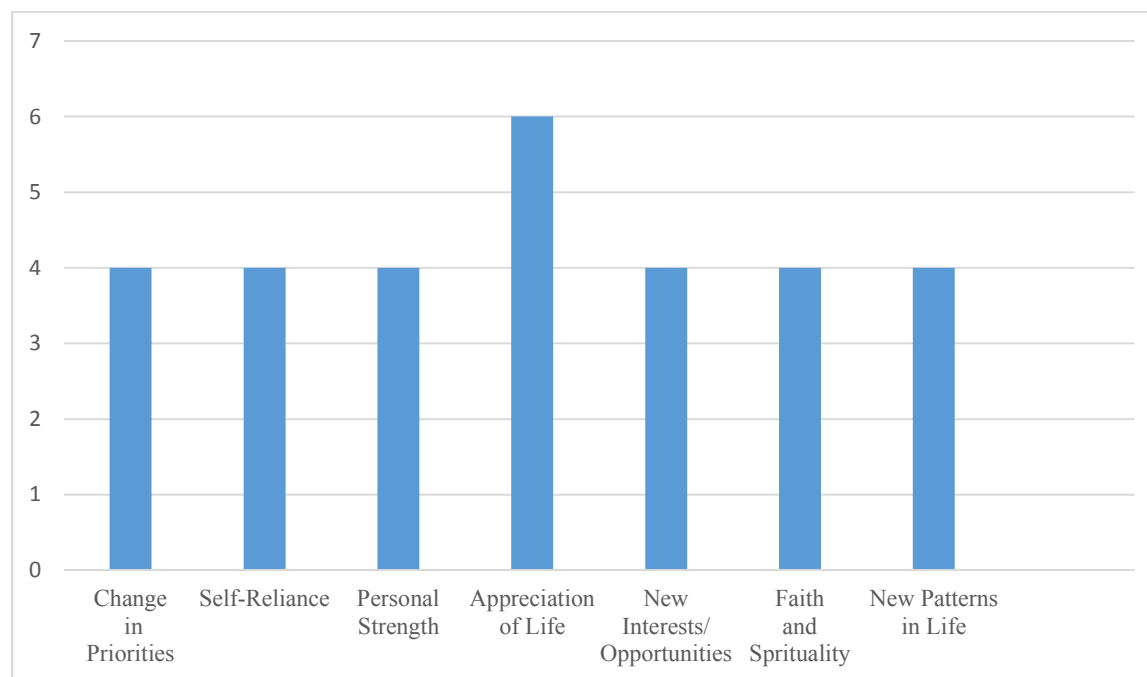
Evaluation of the Findings

The findings of this study aligned with the literature, confirming that after facing an adverse event, an individual can experience posttraumatic growth (Lem, 2016; Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Pioneers Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) initially reported that there were five domain of posttraumatic growth, but after more research and further analysis, the number grew from five to seven (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008; Tedeschi, Blevins, & Riffle, 2017; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Calhoun and Tedeschi enhanced their five-domain PTG model with the following variables that may help facilitate PTG after a traumatic experience: [a] cognitive processing, engagement, or

rumination; [b] disclosure of concerns surrounding traumatic events; [c] the reactions of others to self-disclosures; [d] the sociocultural context in which traumas occur and attempts to process, disclose, and resolve trauma; [e] the personal dispositions of the survivor and the degree to which they are resilient; and [f] the degree to which events either permit or suppress the aforementioned processes. (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011, p. 21)

The seven themes: self-reliance, increased personal strength, appreciation of life, new interests/opportunities, growth driven by faith/spirituality, change in priorities, and new patterns in life were recognized and documented with clusters and coding.

Table 2
Number of Instances within Each Theme of PTG



Self-Reliance: This theme (partially a sub-set of the increased personal strength theme) was related to feeling invincible or fearless and/or having an increased sense of personal strength. The combat veterans expressed feelings of self-reliance, a positive outcome of PTG.

Research Participant #11 had become self-reliant by being more guarded. He stated that his circle of friends was quite small. He said, “I don’t have faith in a lot of people.” Although this could be considered negative, it was also positive in that he trusted himself completely and had no fear of being alone. The other five participants all found ways to thrive after the wars, gained financial freedom, and found ways to synthesize their military skills into civilian life and corporate America.

Increased Personal Strength. This theme was associated to feeling invincible or fearless and/or an increased sense of personal strength. All six research participants showed increased personal strength by overcoming initial doubt about their service, overcoming depression and insomnia, coping with a divorce, making career changes, using their faith, and finding triumph in living to see another day.

Appreciation of Life. This theme related to having more appreciation of life. All six combat veterans experienced a moderate or greater amount for the appreciation of life. This appreciation came in the form of having children, surviving daily fire fights, recovering dead bodies, rekindling love with a partner or crying over the civilian casualties of women and children.

New Interests/Opportunities. This theme linked to the development of a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience. All six combat veterans disclosed that they formed new interests and were faced with new opportunities after their traumatic event. Some made a career change, became entrepreneurs, gained new hobbies, embraced spirituality, began participating in public speaking engagements, and attending graduate school. These interests and opportunities showed that these combat veterans were well-adjusted and highly adaptable.

Growth Driven by Spirituality/Faith. This theme involved having one's spirituality awakened, which could have also involved a change in current beliefs. Five out of the six combat veterans felt that their posttraumatic growth was driven by spirituality or faith. They found themselves changing careers and incorporating their faith with their new career. They had a spiritual awakening and made conscious efforts to deepen their faith, increase their practice of faith, and open themselves to a new relationship with God or others in their lives.

Change in Priorities. This theme related to the development of a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience. Many of the combat veterans expressed that they had a change in priorities. All six participants left the military to pursue other opportunities, some wanted to have children, and one found himself in law enforcement.

New Path in Life. This theme linked to the development of a new outlook on life after coming through a traumatic experience. All six combat veterans had found a new path in life since their days of serving their country. They wanted to be protect and serve (one participant went into law enforcement), find more time to attend church regularly, transition from soldier life to civilian life, serve as a mentor to others professionally and spiritually.

These findings showed that with the proper social/personal and professional networks, combat veterans can grow after experiencing a traumatic war event. In contrast, some veterans may not feel as though they have adequate support systems available to them, especially with the mental health stigma, which could hinder growth. Without oversimplifying, this supported and validated the experiences and themes of the combat veterans interviewed for this study.

Summary

This chapter provided some detail of the six participant interviews. These participants were combat veterans who served in either Afghanistan or Iraq between the years of 2001 and 2015 and had experienced posttraumatic growth after witnessing or living through a traumatic event. Each participant answered open-ended questions regarding their posttraumatic growth experience. The interviews produced six emerging themes with similar ideas, comments, and perspectives about how a combat veteran experiences posttraumatic growth.

Much research exists on soldiers and combat, but not as much existed on posttraumatic growth, which was not represented in the literature. “Qualitative methods are well suited for exploring understudied aspects of human experiences” (Borowa et al, 2016; Pehlke et al., 2009, p. 118). It was discovered that most of the literature focused on populations that faced adversity and traumatic experiences regarding bereavement or chronic illness.

A thorough review of the literature showed that there was not much work done on PTG and combat veterans; however, the content found regarding combat soldiers was valuable and applicable to the combat veteran population. Each combat veteran processed their military experiences differently and the previously mentioned factors might influence that process of growing out of a traumatic experience. Based on the previously mentioned factors, this study examined those factors and how it influenced each combat veteran’s experience with posttraumatic growth. The participants in this study shared their PTG experiences, reporting that it was not one particular factor that brought about the growth, but mostly the realization of the sanctity of life and how they wanted to live their lives after going through their traumatic event. The most comprehensive theme was appreciating not only the military experience but also the *side effects* of that service. For example, fighting for their lives on a minute-to-minute basis

provided a perspective that most people will not obtain. The combat veterans appreciated life, family, and in most cases, their faith. These participants showed that regardless of military branch, age, race, spirituality, background, or marital status that being in battle can sharpen a person's focus and alter their perspective, not just on their own lives, but also the lives of others. They have also shown that provided they get the appropriate support systems (i.e., family, community, career, etc.), they are able to obtain fulfilling, productive lives. Instead of their traumatic event paralyzing or stunting them emotionally, it actually improved their outlook, which encouraged them to move forward in a positive way.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This chapter provided a summary of the findings of this generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic analysis of combat veterans who have experienced posttraumatic growth after serving in wars fought in Iraq and/or Afghanistan. In addition, this chapter addressed the methodology and design of the research, limitations of the study, as well as the implications for the study and recommendations for practice and future research.

During deployment, combat soldiers faced mortality all day, every day. At some point, deployment ended and they returned to their existing military role or they discharge from the military. During deployment, they lived or witnessed many negative and positive events. Some of those events may stay with them forever. Regardless of how traumatic an event can be, an individual can experience the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth (Lem, 2016, Posttraumatic Growth Research Group, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996.) Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is a psychological construct that leads a person to feel optimistic and have a positive outlook on life (Kampman et al, 2015; Martz et al, 2018).

Although literature existed on posttraumatic growth as it pertains to terminal illness and physical violence, there wasn't a lot in the context of combat veterans' experiences with the traumatic events of war that provided a deeper understanding of their unique experiences for researchers (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin et al, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative content analysis research was to analyze the transcripts of combat veterans and identify themes that provided a rich, detailed understanding into a combat veteran's experience with PTG.

This qualitative study implemented the generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic analysis. It was an appropriate choice for several reasons. First, it explored (a) the

combat veterans' experiences with PTG, (b) their perceptions of the achievement and sustainment of PTG, and (c) the descriptions of themes that result from the personal accounts of the combat veterans' experiences with PTG (Creswell, 2007; Fingeld-Connet, 2014). Second, it contributed to the existing literature that mainly focused on PTG as it related to illness and physical violence by shining a light on combat veterans experiences with PTG and there wasn't much understanding of the phenomenon (Borowa et al, 2016; Mohsin, Rahman, Rana, Azam, & Masood, 2016; Russano et al, 2017). Third, this methodology was appropriate because of the sample population/combat veterans being guarded and inaccessible, the sample size was small but the information researched provided an intimate view of the veteran's experience. Lastly, this methodology was suitable because combat veterans were underrepresented in the post-traumatic growth literature (Fingeld-Connet, 2014).

The research design was appropriate for the problem because it allowed the researcher to explore the intimate PTG experiences of the combat veterans by conducting open-ended interviews which encouraged unrestricted dialog (Russano et al, 2017). In addition, the research design allowed the researcher to look at the data in its entirety and produce precise conclusions about the veterans' experiences with posttraumatic growth (Braun et al, 2019). The research design was appropriate for the purpose because it provided insight into the personal experiences of the combat veterans and allowed the researcher to gather, identify, and analyze themes in the transcripts (Fingeld-Connet, 2014; Mohsin et al, 2016).

This study was limited because of the small sample size of six participants. "Qualitative methods are well suited for exploring understudied aspects of human experiences" (Pehlke et al., 2009, p. 118). The generic qualitative paradigm with inductive thematic analysis methodology described the posttraumatic growth phenomenon with a small sample of six participants who

have served in the military. Personal and professional experiences of the participants and the researcher were used to help understand and explain the data. The researcher was interested in understanding the combat veterans' experiences of posttraumatic growth after serving their country in a war. According to Patton (2002), the sample size may vary with qualitative studies. It often depends on the phenomenon that is being studied, how the sample size will provide credibility, and how the researcher can use their resources (Patton, 2002). Because the sample size was purposeful and the researcher had some limitations to gaining access to combat veterans, the intended sample size was small; however, the participants provided rich and credible data.

The sample for this study came from various states in the United States with one participant in South Africa. Although the participants all come from different areas, the group was representative of the general combat veteran population's lack of ethnic diversity (e.g., five White, one Black). However, in addition to the small sample size, the other limitation was that no females were interviewed. The results from this study may be generalized to the larger combat veteran population, which was consistent with qualitative research methodology.

Implications

The findings of this research contributed to the literature regarding combat veterans and their experiences with posttraumatic growth. These findings suggested that combat veterans who experienced a positive change in their outlook of life (new interests and opportunities), interpersonal relationships, personal strength, and awakened spirituality, coped with their traumatic event and experience posttraumatic growth. In addition, the findings also suggested that combat veterans can experience posttraumatic growth with appropriate social and professional support systems. Researchers have found that people with adequate resources tend

not to be overwhelmed and can better adjust to life after war (Marotta-Walters et al., 2015). For combat veterans, there was a correlation between PTG and personality traits such as caring and being open to using social supports (Marotta-Walters et al., 2015) to help them assimilate back into non-combat zones and lead functional, successful lives. Generally, this study showed that combat veterans can witness or survive a traumatic event and cope after that event, live a productive life afterwards by being open to try new things, having an appreciation of life and an increased sense of personal strength, and relying on their faith. There were no factors identified that might have influenced the interpretation of the results. The researcher analyzed the transcripts only, which helped to alleviate prejudgments or bias.

The inductive thematic analysis approach allowed for the content analysis of transcripts. This analysis allowed the researcher to produce codes for the data, evaluate themes that led to defining and labeling themes to generate a solid document that accurately described each participant's experience with PTG. Thus, answering the research questions of how combat veterans experience and characterize posttraumatic growth, what they believe contributed to posttraumatic growth, and what elements can be attributed to posttraumatic growth in the veterans. The results showed that even after a traumatic event, combat veterans can experience positive changes in their life, specifically in having a greater appreciation of life, being open to new interests, having improved self-reliance and having a better understanding of their faith or spiritual matters.

Through the use of a generic qualitative paradigm, the research questions listed in Chapter 1 were appropriately addressed. Some themes appeared more than once in the transcripts, addressing those research questions (Javidi & Zarea, 2016). The inductive thematic analysis model was appropriate for the research questions. Data were analyzed with each

participant's data compared amongst each other. This model allowed for the exploration of the soldiers' attitudes and beliefs and of an understanding of their experiences of coming out of stressful, traumatic events, and obtaining posttraumatic growth.

In recent years, there have been many studies on the phenomenon of PTG. Researchers have been looking a correlations and consequences of posttraumatic growth, as well as developing theoretical models to further the research. According to Tedeschi and McNally (2011), the U.S. Army was developing a Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program that will hopefully help them to assist their combat soldiers in experiencing posttraumatic growth prior to serving in a war.

Calhoun and Tedeschi enhanced their five-domain PTG model with the following variables that may help facilitate PTG after a traumatic experience:

[a] cognitive processing, engagement, or rumination; [b] disclosure of concerns surrounding traumatic events; [c] the reactions of others to self-disclosures; [d] the sociocultural context in which traumas occur and attempts to process, disclose, and resolve trauma; [e] the personal dispositions of the survivor and the degree to which they are resilient; and [f] the degree to which events either permit or suppress the aforementioned processes. (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011, p. 21)

PTG research not only had the five domains, but also the previously mentioned variables. It should be noted that throughout the literature review, the researcher found that the PTG model was constantly evolving. This indicated that the study of PTG was not only important and meaningful but also fluid.

Recommendations for Practice

Although this study focused only on combat veterans, there was significant literature that focused on chronic illness, terminal illness, terrorists attacks, motor vehicle accidents, sexual assault, law enforcement, and physical injury (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018; Coroiu et al, 2016, Shakespeare-Finch & Armstrong, 2010). The traumatic event was the common denominator with these types of situations, thus allowing practitioners to implement psychological theory and techniques in treating various populations who have experienced a variety of traumatic experiences. After deconstructing the traumatic event, a practitioner can explore each domain of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and determine which domain the person has experienced by examining how they perceive their current lives and how they are moving forward (Moore & Penke, 2019). Existing research showed that posttraumatic growth can be applied to various traumatized populations, having shared the common experience of a traumatic event or witnessing the event because the common thread was the true human experience (Chtrereva, Ward, & Ramsey-Wade, 2017; Nishi, Matsouka, & Kim, 2010; Oginska-Bulik, 2015).

Recommendations for Future Research

This research explored the posttraumatic growth experiences of combat veterans who witnessed or survived a traumatic event while serving in a war in either Iraq or Afghanistan. These combat veterans achieved growth, and that growth can be used by them to have meaning lives after a traumatic experience. All six participants reported they had a new outlook on life and had more appreciation for life. For future research, researchers may want to obtain a larger sample and include female combat veterans. In addition, future researchers may want to revise this study from qualitative to quantitative using the PTG domains and themes this researcher

uncovered. Expanding this to a quantitative study, future researchers may question if there is an actual cause and effect. Future studies may look at the correlations of combat veterans who did not report posttraumatic growth and those who did. The conclusion may be that the combat veterans did go on to show a correlation that their lives were better adjusted and lead a more successful life. Implications would be that posttraumatic growth exists, but does it mean what researchers think it meant? This study confirmed that not only does posttraumatic growth exist but that combat veterans experience it after deployment and researchers have identified and properly explained the phenomenon for researchers and for the general public.

Conclusions

This study of combat veterans examined the experiences of combat veterans with posttraumatic growth and how that growth allowed them to lead productive lives after being involved in a traumatic event while serving their country in war zones. Many of the themes discovered in this study aligned with previous research on posttraumatic growth and resilience of combat veterans and other populations suggesting that they can cope and thrive after living through a traumatic event. This study showed that although combat veterans can witness and experience horrific, traumatic events, there can be positive outcomes leading to new job opportunities, improved interpersonal relationships, and enhanced spirituality. This study will be a useful contribution to the literature on PTG and combat veterans by illuminating the private experiences of combat veterans. This research also provided a gateway to additional research and applicability for practitioners. There was research regarding combat veterans and their war experiences but there wasn't much data that gave them a voice due to underrepresentation in the literature (Borowa et al, 2016; Pehlke, Hennon, Radina, & Kovalanka, 2009). Although this

population tended to be guarded, based upon the detailed transcripts, each participant seemed comfortable sharing his posttraumatic growth experiences and had a positive outlook on life. Each participant expressed that he felt as though he had a good, productive life and did not express any signs of regret or anger regarding his service to the country. The outcome of this study confirmed that combat veterans were mentally flexible and have positive life experiences after traumatic events during wartime.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Raw Data

How Combat Veterans Experience and Characterize Posttraumatic Growth?

Participant #10: This combat veteran had experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a car accident. He experienced growth in all seven domains, with his biggest areas of growth in the following areas: (a) a change in priorities, (b) a greater appreciation of life, (c) a greater feeling of self-reliance, (d) a better understanding of spiritual matters, (e) counting on others in tough times, (f) a new path in life, (g) closeness to others, (h) expressing his emotions, (i) handling difficulties, (j) doing better things with his life, (k) having a better appreciation of each day, and (l) putting more effort into his relationships. He believed that as a result of his service in the military and the car accident, which happened Stateside, his life had been changed. He stated, “Those experiences prepared me for what I am doing now. I’m able to give back more to the airmen that I work with every day and the commanders that I advise. I would have never gone back to school and got my first masters. I don’t tend to jump into things quite like I did when I was younger. I tend to sit back, observe what is going on and collect my thoughts, and then initiate actions. When I retired and went through a divorce, my whole thing was got to take care of number one. Then I met my current wife, and we have been together for almost five and a half years.” Participant #10 also learned that he had to respect people more because it is unknown how long they will be in your life. In addition, he developed new interests such as cooking and woodworking. He also made efforts to attend mass at least once or twice a month. He learned to forgive and move on with his life. He was open to new opportunities, personally (re-marrying) and

professionally (building a civilian career while still working for the government). He was not jaded by his experiences or the military.

Participant #11: This combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq. He experienced growth in two of the seven domains with the biggest growth in the following areas: (a) greater appreciation of life, (b) greater feeling of self-reliance, (c) willingness to express his emotions, (d) doing better things with his life, (e) better appreciating each day, and (f) more likely to change things which need changing.

Participant #11 said the following: “[I am] happy to be alive. Some complacency has set in since then. I still wear my dog tag to try to keep me in my place sometimes. The average civilian doesn’t understand what you go through on a day-to-day basis so they’d rather talk about wine and the weather and what shoes or clothes they wear on a daily basis than comprehend or understand what it’s like. In order to be protector you got to have a different mentality and a different outlook on life that the average person doesn’t have and doesn’t want to know.” Prior to his participation on this study, he was unaware of PTG although he knew that he had changed in some ways. He is a private person and does not feel the need to verbalize his thoughts with others, including his wife. The researcher believed this combat veteran has learned to cope with his traumatic experience and experienced PTG, but not necessarily in a positive way. This veteran appeared guarded and matter-of-fact-like in his transcripts, which provided a contrast to the other participants. In addition, this participant did not experience as much growth as the other participants because of the nature of his personality and existing mental models of being stoic and potentially, unavailable emotionally. However, to prove this, more research would need to be done.

Participant #14: This combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq, in all seven domains but his strongest growth included: (a) having had a greater appreciation of life and each day, (b) having had a better understanding of spiritual matters, (c) having had a new path for his life, (d) been more willing to express his emotions, (e) recognized personal strength, and (f) learned how wonderful people are. Participant #14 felt as though it was an honor to serve. He viewed himself as highly adaptable to people and the environment. After serving, his new path was to go into education. He said, “It’s kinda funny because even in my pre-military days, going back to college and high school, I was told on many occasions that I would be working with children.” In addition, he found that although he was a believer of Christianity, he did not acknowledge spirituality, which he now has a result of his deployment. Based on the completed survey and transcript, the researcher believed that this combat veteran struggled the most with understanding what he did and why he did it. His PTG has allowed him to accept his role in the war and move on to a meaning career in secondary education.

Participant #15: This combat veteran has experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. He experienced PTG in all seven domains but his biggest growth occurred in the following areas: (a) changed priorities, (b) a greater appreciation for life and each day, (c) having a better understanding of spiritual matters, (d) having a new path for his life, (e) accepting the way things work out, (f) having new opportunities present themselves, and (g) having stronger religious faith. This participant experienced a great deal change and growth. His deployment made him keenly aware of his responsibility as a parent. Initially, his identity was wrapped around his life as a soldier.

He has re-kindled his old interests and found new ones such as camping, hiking, and hunting. He feels his most prolific growth pertained to his spiritual life. He said, “My faith was deepened. My Christian faith has always been a part of who I am. What I understood about God and how he operates changed as a result of a bad experience. I was angry after I came back from Iraq for probably a year. I was re-living some of those experiences and questioning why God had allowed certain people to die and others to live. Once I was out of the Army, sitting in church, my pastor said something in the service and it struck me in my spirit about how God is in the darkness with us. The Lord carried me through that experience. I learned that God allows us to experience difficult things in life to draw us closer to him and depend on him.”

Participant #18: This combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq. He experienced growth in four of the seven domains, with the most growth occurring in the following areas: (a) new interests and path in life, (b) change things that need changing, (c) appreciation of life, and (d) feeling stronger than he thought.

Although this participant was greatly affected by the birth of his children, becoming an entrepreneur, and deciding to go to graduate school, one of the most changes in growth pertains to the awakening of his spirituality. He said, “I was not a Christian, not a believer until a year after I came back from Iraq and got out of the military. I didn’t have any understanding of spiritual matters until the 2004-time frame.”

Participant #21: This combat veteran experienced PTG through his war experiences in Iraq. This participant experienced PTG in four of the seven domains with the most significant growth in the following areas: (a) greater appreciation of life, (b) better understanding of spiritual matters, (c) new path in life, (d) greater sense of closeness with

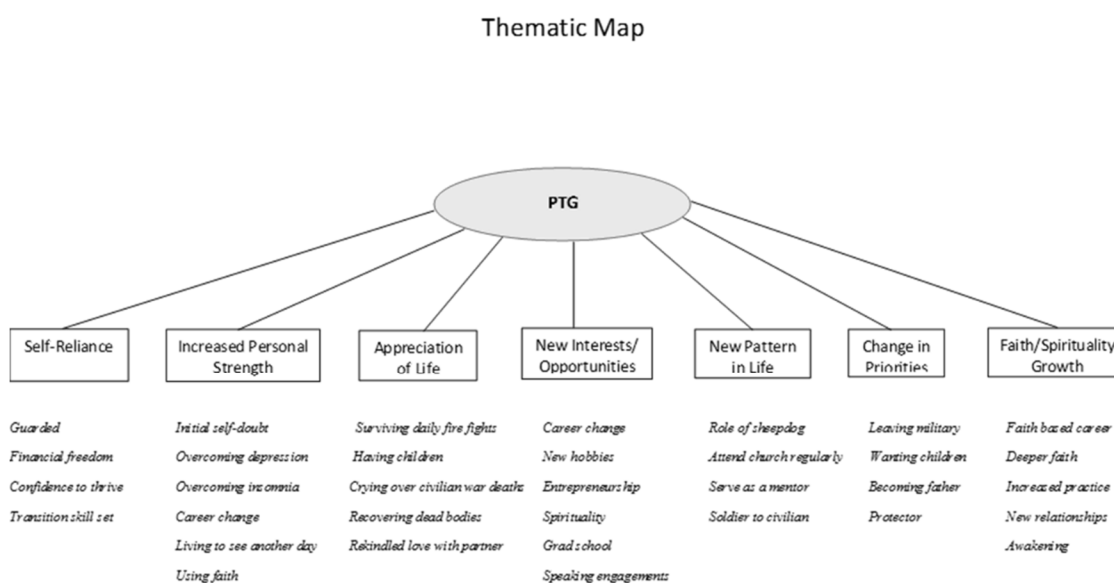
others, (e) better handle difficulties, and (f) stronger religious faith. The post-traumatic growth caused a personality change, from carefree to more serious. His combat experiences also brought about a change in how he approaches life's challenges. The most significant growth occurred with his faith and spirituality. During his deployment, he found himself seeking comfort in his faith and he ended up mentoring other soldiers with prayer and readings. He said the following, "I'm a born-again Christian and when I was in the war, I think the presence of God became very real to me that year because I was alone. From that perspective, I was away from my Christian community and I was away from my family. The combination of that sense of loneliness and the threat of death on a daily basis makes you think about what's after this life. In those times, my spiritual life just grew leaps and bounds. My prayers became much more real to me. I saw that other people needed that too and so in some way I felt responsible to be a bridge for people who didn't have faith. When I was in Iraq, I decided that I would be a pastor and that was what I was supposed to do with my life. As a Christian, our hope is beyond this world, our hope is in something in the world to come and the life to come, if there's a life that's beyond this life."

What Veterans Believe Most Contributes to Posttraumatic Growth?

The veterans mostly believe that the overall deployment experience initiated the posttraumatic growth they achieved post-deployment. Based on the data, the veterans saw overall improvements or enhancements to at least one area of their lives.

What Elements Attributed to Posttraumatic Growth in Combat Veterans?

Various elements attributed to the posttraumatic growth in combat veterans. Each domain discussed explores the shared experiences of the veterans. Based on Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2011) structure of PTG, the thematic map below displays the combat veterans experiences within each domain:



Below is a table that identifies emerging themes with an accompanying clustered meaning unit exemplars and transformative synopses:

Table 3
Emerging Themes

Emergent Theme Code	Clustered Meaning Unit Exemplars	Transformative Synopses
Self-Reliance	<p>“I think the experiences, um, of, uh, you know, things at a different level of seriousness while you're deployed and while you're in combat and so, when you come back, and, um, you know, working in a civilian sector, um, that I think that's, that's what I was getting at with my response is that, yes, I do have a greater sense of self-reliance. You know, I've proven myself in battle and, you know, leadership positions within a combat infantry unit and, and I know that, you know, I have, I have sound decision making skills, um, whatever, that will, that will make me successful in a less demanding and less critical environment. There is an entrepreneurial spirit, I think, that has been invoked since being deployed and getting out of the military and I don't know why that is. Maybe that's, you know, wanting to do something good with my, you know, do something great, being noted for something.”</p> <p>“When I got back from Iraq the third time...had my divorce and it allowed me to kind of refocus on my life...got to take care of number one.”</p> <p>“You got to have heart in a world that survives...the mental fortitude to push yourself through whatever shit you get in.”</p> <p>“My trust in people is very limited.”</p>	All six participants, have experienced a moderate to very great degree increase in self-reliance after a traumatic event.
Increased Personal Strength	<p>“I've overcome a lot of obstacles, you know. Since the time that I got out in 2004, um, struggles with, uh, you know, transitioning out of the military life into the commercial world, um, self-doubt, mountains of, of, of self-doubt, negative self-talk, um, sleep issues which I don't know if they're related or not, which is why I'm so tired right now. And, uh, issues with depression. Uh, and, and into a large degree, I have overcome that.”</p> <p>“You know, is it still a struggle from time to time? Absolutely. But, you know, compared to, um, where I've been and the lows that I'd been and the growth that I've had over the past ten years, um, yeah, I'm in a much better place now. I've made great strides.”</p> <p>“We survived one fire fight and go into the next one, and then the next one...everybody comes back with their fingers and toes, nobody has anything other than minor injuries.”</p> <p>“I am stronger than I thought I was. I've overcome a lot of obstacles, you know.”</p>	Although five out of six combat veterans experienced an increase in personal strength, only four of them had a moderate or greater degree of change due to their traumatic experience.

Appreciation of Life	<p>“You know, I’m happy to be alive.”</p> <p>“I’ve never had an incident over there that, where I got injured or been injured. And, ah, came back Stateside, got hit by a drunk driver and it changed my life.”</p> <p>“I realized how brief life is and how, you know, in a second, it can be taken from you.”</p> <p>“I do want to do good things with my life and I have a better appreciation for that.”</p> <p>“As you are going through those, you know, potentially life threatening situations and it all ties to, you know, appreciation of just not my own life, it’s just life in general.”</p> <p>“Whenever I’m feeling down myself and, uh, not being appreciative of just the sun coming up that I do think of, excuse me, do think of friends that, that I had that, you know, that didn’t come back and don’t have that luxury.”</p>	All but one reported that they experienced this change at a great degree or a very great degree.
Change in Priorities	<p>“Without meeting my current wife, I probably would be overseas as a contractor...seeking out money.”</p> <p>“I was just sitting there, holding this little baby in my arms there at the Army hospital at Fort Campbell. I mean right there I felt in my heart that there was no way I was going back to Iraq. Soon after that, I started the separation process.”</p>	All participants indicated that they experienced a change in their priorities due to their traumatic experience.
Faith/Spirituality Growth	<p>I’ve grown up in a non-denominational household. When I went overseas, I wasn’t that church-going individual. I’m still not 100%, like every Sunday, but I try to go to mass at least once or twice a month.”</p> <p>“I have never called myself a religious person, but I definitely have my beliefs but you kind of come more in touch with what those beliefs are as you are going through those, you know, potentially life-threatening situations.”</p>	All but one participant has experienced a change in their faith/spirituality or understanding of spiritual matters.

“I’m a Christian. I’m a Born Again Christian and I was a Born Again Christ -- and when I was in the war, uhm, but I think -- I think the presence of God became very real to me in that year because, you know, I, ah, was alone in -- from, ah, from the perspective that I was away from my Christian community and I was away from my family. I think in, ah, combination of that sense of loneliness and the threat of death on a daily basis. My spiritual life just grew leaps and bounds and I -- you know, my prayers became much more real to me like, the -- then give for the presence of God on a daily and hourly basis, uhm, was much more profound for myself. The idea of faith is that you believe in something you can’t see. As a Christian, you know, our hope is beyond this world, our hope is in something in the world to come and the life to come, if there’s a life beyond this life.”

“My pastor said that God is in the darkness with us and that struck my spirit. I learned that God allows us to experience difficult things in life to draw us closer to him so that we really have to rely on him and depend on him. When I was going through some of the most intense experiences and Although I didn’t feel God, it didn’t mean that he wasn’t there with me, um, and that he literally had carried me through those experiences.”

“I did not consider myself to be Christian or a believer until about year after returning home and discharging from the Army.”
