



Posttraumatic growth during unemployment: A qualitative examination of distress and positive transformation

Lea Waters · Gabriel Strauss

Abstract: This qualitative study explored the presence of growth, distress, deliberate rumination (a type of positive rumination as opposed to intrusive rumination) and dialectical thinking in a sample of unemployed people. Semi-structured interviews with 22 unemployed people were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis. Fryer's (1992) agency-restriction theory and Jahoda's (1988) latent deprivation theory were used to examine distress, whereas Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004a) posttraumatic growth theory and Latack and Dozier's career growth model (1986) were used to analyze growth. As a result of dealing with the challenges of unemployment, participants became connected with their inner strengths, experienced gratitude for their supportive relationships, felt compassion for other unemployed people and became open to new career pathways. Deliberate rumination and dialectical thinking appeared to promote posttraumatic growth. This study applied a positive psychology approach to unemployment and examined the relevance of posttraumatic growth within the context of job loss. The paper suggests ways in which unemployment counseling can adopt the dual aims of ameliorating distress *and* fostering growth.

Keywords: unemployment, posttraumatic growth, positive psychology, deliberate rumination, dialectical thinking, wellbeing

1. Introduction

This paper aims to alert researchers and counselors working with unemployed people to the possibility of positive outcomes of job loss in addition to the well-evidenced negative outcomes. Understanding both distress and growth as outcomes of unemployment will offer new directions for developing job loss assistance programs and career counseling practices. We used a positive psychology approach in this qualitative study to help us uncover the potential positive outcomes of unemployment. Positive psychology seeks to examine "strengths, virtues, beneficial conditions, and processes that contribute to well-being" (Rusk & Waters, 2015, p. 207). In the current study we explored whether two positive processes—deliberate rumination and dialectical thinking—support growth during unemployment. We examined growth along the five dimensions of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) posttraumatic growth (PTG) model: improved relationships, new possibilities, a greater appreciation of life, an increased sense of personal strength, and spiritual development.

In adopting a positive psychology approach, we are aware that a criticism of the field is that its focus on the positive may invalidate or hide negative experiences (Oliver, 2005). In this study,



we therefore adopted recent calls to follow a non-dualistic approach and recognize that positive and negative outcomes can co-exist (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2015; Wong, 2011). In Held's (2004) critique of positive psychology, she found evidence of a "second-wave message" (p. 18) in positive psychology that calls for a better understanding of the interplay between positives and negatives in creating human flourishing. We are part of this second-wave message and seek to examine the interplay between positive and negative states activated by job loss. We explore two processes—deliberate rumination and dialectical thinking—that have both negative and positive aspects to them, but ultimately lead to positive outcomes by promoting clarity and self-awareness (Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, Triplett, Vishnevsky, & Lindstrom, 2011).

In establishing the field of positive psychology, Seligman (2002) argued that positive psychology research must be firmly anchored in the scientific method. He placed experimental-control studies with randomized assignment as the "gold standard" of science and stressed that positive psychology research needs to be "replicable, cumulative, and objective" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001, p. 91). This approach has been important in providing empirical ways to measure positive concepts that were previously fuzzy (e.g., hope, empathy, gratitude).

However, positive psychology has also been criticized for its reductionistic approach (Rathunde, 2001; Rennie, 2012; Resnick, Warmoth, & Serlin, 2001). Although quantitative designs can allow us to examine causal relationships and large-scale trends, they run the risk of airbrushing important differences experienced by individuals. Qualitative approaches offer positive psychology researchers a window into the intricate stories and contours of experience for individuals. As such, there have been calls for positive psychology to adopt a greater range of epistemological methodologies to complement the empiricist approach (Rennie, 2012; Hefferon, Ashfield, Waters, & Synard, forthcoming). In the current study, we used a qualitative method to uncover the interplay between positive and negative processes and outcomes during unemployment and gain a deeper understanding of individual experiences of job loss.

2. Unemployment as a source of trauma

Research has consistently shown unemployment to be a highly traumatic event, characterized by feelings of shock, loss, and extreme distress (Cottle, 2003; Darity & Goldsmith, 1996; Gabriel, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2010; Madonia, 1983; Paul & Moser, 2009; Schneer, 1993; Wanberg, 2012). Garrett-Peters (2009) argues that unemployment can create a sense of rupture in identity that assaults the deepest aspect of self. Indeed, some people equate job termination with identity termination (Taplin & Lacy, 2002). Joelson and Walhquist (1987) described unemployment as "an acute psychological crisis" (p. 180). Others have found that unemployment can lead to suicidal ideation (Blakely, Collings, & Atkinson, 2003), parasuicide (Platt & Hawton, 2000), and, at the extreme, completed suicide (Wanberg, 2012).

There are two well-accepted theories about the causes of distress during unemployment: (a) Fryer's financial-restriction theory and (b) Jahoda's latent deprivation theory. Fryer (1992) argued that individuals strive for meaningful purpose related to their goals and values, and that psychological distress results from the restriction of personal agency due to the financial strain of unemployment. Individuals with less money have increased difficulty in creating personally satisfying lifestyles, leading to greater psychological distress (Fryer & Payne, 1984). Numerous studies support this model by demonstrating that financial strain significantly predicts psychological distress (Creed & Macintyre, 2001; Creed, Muller, & Machin, 2001; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005).

Jahoda (1981; 1988) suggested that employment offers "latent benefits" apart from providing income and that distress arises when these latent benefits are removed due to job loss.

Employment provides an activity around which time may be structured, contact with people other than an individual's immediate family, a sense of purpose that transcends one's self-directed interests, and an aspect of our identity. Jahoda also argued that employment creates a sense of enforced activity, as most jobs require people to engage in tasks and responsibilities outside of their normal range of behavior. Her latent deprivation theory therefore attributes psychological distress to the deprivation of five latent functions that are necessary for wellbeing: time structure, social contact, identity, collective purpose, and enforced activity (Jahoda, 1981; 1988). Over two decades of research now support this theory (Carson, Winefield, Waters, & Kerr, 2003; Creed & Macinture, 2001; Creed et al., 2001), demonstrating how limited access to these benefits leads to increased psychological distress (Janlert & Hammarström, 2009; Muller, Creed, Waters, & Machin, 2005; Muller, Goddard, Creed, Johnson, & Waters, 2006; Sverko, Galic, Maslić Seršić, & Galesic, 2008; Waters & Muller, 2003).

These studies have directed researchers and practitioners to focus on identifying the negative consequences of unemployment to reduce the "unemployment blues" (Tobias, 1994, p. 1931). Such research has typically attempted to reduce depression (Moorhouse & Caltabiano, 2007), decrease deprivation (Waters & Moore, 2002), mitigate grief and despair, (Archer & Rhodes, 1993), and repair damage to self-concept (Fraccaroli, LeBlanc, & Hajjar, 1994; Garrett-Peters, 2009). The current study builds on this body of research, but also extends it by informing researchers and practitioners of processes and methods that may promote growth (and not just mitigate distress) during unemployment.

3. Unemployment as a source for growth

Although the field has systematically studied the negative aspects of unemployment since the 1930s (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1933), only a small number of studies have investigated its positive outcomes. Indeed, Waters, Briscoe, and Hall's (2013) bibliometric analysis of all peer-reviewed journal articles published on the topic of unemployment from 1980–2012 (475 articles across 19 databases) found a positive-negative ratio of 1:33. They concluded that "much of the research into unemployment has focused on what people lose during unemployment rather than what people can gain" (p. 19). With the exception of Fraher and Gabriel (2014), the bulk of studies that focus on positive outcomes were published a considerable time ago (see Latack & Dozier, 1986; Jones 1989; Eby & Buch, 1995; Zikic & Klehe, 2006; Zikic, & Richardson, 2007). There is, therefore, a clear need for more contemporary research on the positive and growth-oriented outcomes of unemployment.

In the current study, we explored the potential positive outcomes of unemployment by applying PTG theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). O'Leary and Ickovics (1995) describe PTG as the experience of positive change triggered through trauma and adversity. Similarly, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004a) define PTG as "the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises" (p. 1). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) and Taku, Cann, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2008) identified a five-factor model of PTG: improved relationships, new possibilities, a greater appreciation of life, an increased sense of personal strength, and spiritual development.

It is important to note that PTG results from the individual's desire to make meaning of the trauma, rather than from the trauma itself (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; 2004b). The formation of meaning is triggered by the fact that the event calls into question a person's deeply-held assumptions about how the world operates (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; 2006). For example, if you were a high-performing, loyal employee, then you might believe that you had job security. These assumptions allow the individual to operate with clarity and predictability (Gluhoski &

Wortman, 1996). After these assumptions fail to hold, a person can engage in rebuilding new worldviews. Cann et al. (2011) assert that PTG arises from the process of attempting to understand the event and rebuild one's core beliefs, which presents "the opportunity for realizing growth" (p. 137).

PTG has been reported by people following major accidents, life-threatening illness, natural disasters, combat experience, and bereavement (Hefferon, Grealy & Mutrie, 2009; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Hefferon et al. (2009) argued that different types of trauma may induce different growth responses. In this study, we explore the responses of PTG in a sample of unemployed people.

In the PsychINFO database, we only found three prior studies that explored the unemployment-PTG link (Berger, 2015; Lamela, Figueiredo, Bastos, & Martins, 2015; Nuttman-Shwartz, & Gadot, 2012). However, in all three articles, the authors simply listed unemployment as a trigger for PTG (along with other potential triggers). To date, no empirical research has examined whether there is evidence of PTG during unemployment.

Although the specific PTG construct has not been studied in the context of unemployment, a small body of evidence in the 1980s and 1990s found that unemployment can be a time of growth. For instance, Latack and Dozier (1986) found that in certain conditions, unemployment leads to positive career transitions. They focused on career growth, which they defined as the situation where the transition from job loss to reemployment provides new, and sometimes more, opportunities for career success. The results of Eby and Buch (1995) support that of Latack and Dozier (1986) and found that some people used involuntary job loss as a trigger to find new career opportunities and experience career growth. Jones (1989) established that some people experience a more general type of growth following unemployment if they use it as a positive opportunity to change their life direction.

In the 2000s, Zikic and Klehe (2006) showed that those people who used unemployment as a time for examining self-identity and alternative career options obtained high-quality reemployment. Some participants found that job loss turned out to be a "blessing in disguise" (Zikic & Klehe, 2006, p. 391). A year later, Zikic and Richardson's (2007) study challenged the widely-held view of job loss as a negative experience by presenting evidence of job loss as a positive trigger for career exploration. In their qualitative study of white-collar managers who had been made redundant, they found that participants used unemployment as a time to explore their values and interests and to obtain a deeper understanding of themselves. They then used this deeper self-understanding to shape their next career move. The type of reflection studied by Zikic and Richardson was akin to Cann et al.'s (2011) deliberate rumination (a process we will consider in the next section) in that it was voluntary and purposive. The positive reflective process of these unemployed managers allowed them to assign meaning to their experience of unemployment and look for future career paths that would lead to self-fulfillment.

More recently, Waters et al. (2013) found evidence of career growth following unemployment for those people who have the core career values of freedom and growth, and who approach their careers in self-directed and values-driven ways. In addition, Fraher and Gabriel (2014) studied the importance of narratives in predicting whether people stayed traumatized by unemployment or were able to grow. The authors identified two narratives in jobless people: 1) stuck or 2) moving on. People with a "stuck narrative" had an unresolved sense of sadness, frustration, and desperation about their unemployment. They saw job loss as a wound and felt powerless. Those with a "moving on" narrative had "worked through the trauma" (p. 934) and had made sense of their experience. They used reflection in voluntary ways to make meaning of

their experience, retrain, take on new work, and adopt new work patterns. These people reported that they had regained control over their life and their identity.

Although these seven papers all suggest that growth is a possible outcome following the trauma of unemployment, none of the studies examined growth within the PRG framework. Five of the studies focused specifically on *career* growth. Jones viewed growth in a general sense and Fraher and Gabriel considered both career growth and identity growth. As such, it is currently unclear whether unemployment triggers growth in the five domains of PTG: improved relationships, new possibilities, a greater appreciation of life, an increased sense of personal strength, and spiritual development.

4. Two processes that may foster post-traumatic growth during unemployment

4.1 *Dialectical Thinking and Deliberate Rumination*

PTG theory suggests that unemployment counselors can not only reduce distress but can also help clients explore the possibility of growth. One way counselors can attempt this is by encouraging individuals to deploy dialectical thinking. *Dialectical thinking* refers to the ability to view issues and experiences from multiple perspectives and to reconcile opposing forces and information (Basseches, 1980). Rather than thinking unemployment is all bad (e.g., career suicide) or all good (e.g., permanent vacation), dialectical thinking helps a person to resolve two seemingly contradictory positions into a meaningful, more reasonable experience where the person can accommodate both the bad and good aspects of unemployment (e.g., it's bad because of financial pressure but it's good that I get to spend more time with my family).

Wong's (2011) writings in positive psychology support the idea of dialectical thinking as a positive process, suggesting that people benefit from finding ways to make meaning of "the complex interactions between the negatives and positives in order to optimize positive outcomes" (p. 69). Such a dialectical approach is also discussed by Cann et al. (2011), who recognize that a traumatic event can both disrupt *and* strengthen a person's way of thinking. Emmon's (2007) notion of "adversity transferred into opportunity" also supports this idea (p. 6). Finally, Tedeschi and McNally (2011) suggested that dialectical thinking and the appreciation of paradoxes are effective elements in fostering PTG. Specifically, they encourage people to see:

how loss and gain are not mutually exclusive, how the aftermath of traumatic events may require support from others yet at the same time individual strength, how one has some control but must also accept the lack of control, how grief can coincide with gratitude, and vulnerability with strength. (p. 22)

In addition to dialectical thinking, Cann et al. (2011) propose that another key element in assisting PTG is *deliberate rumination*, a form of voluntary and purposeful reflection that seeks to try and understand negative events and their implications. According to Cann et al. (2011), "[t]he term rumination has acquired a negative connotation in recent years, particularly in the clinical literature on depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where the word has been used by some to mean only self-focused negative thinking about symptoms" (p. 138). However, several researchers have challenged the idea that rumination is only a negative process. For example, Treynor, Gonzalez, and Nolen-Hoeksema (2003) found two distinct types of rumination: brooding and reflective pondering. Brooding is a negative form of "thinking anxiously and thinking gloomily," whereas reflective pondering is a more positive form of rumination that involves reflecting and pondering in ways that attempt to deal with and overcome problems and difficulties. While brooding is a passive rumination process in which individuals focus on and lament their current situation (or compare it with some unachieved

standard), reflective pondering is a “purposeful turning inward to engage in cognitive problem-solving to alleviate one’s depressive symptoms” (Treyner et al., 2003, p. 256).

Similarly, Cann et al. (2011) identified two types of rumination: intrusive rumination and deliberate rumination. They argue that although both types of rumination involve recurrent thinking triggered by a challenging experience, the two types of rumination diverge in very important ways and lead to very different mental health outcomes. According to Cann et al. (2011), *intrusive rumination* involves invasive, undesired, negative thoughts that are commonly associated with symptoms of distress. In contrast, *deliberate rumination* involves a more controlled focus, wherein the individual uses reminiscing, anticipating, and problem-solving to make sense of the experience and move forward in a positive direction. Whereas intrusive rumination is an unsolicited invasion, individuals voluntarily engage in deliberate rumination.

Cann et al. (2011) therefore argue that “not all forms of rumination are detrimental” (p. 138). Indeed, deliberate rumination has been found to predict increased PTG (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000). Two other studies on employment have found evidence of these more positive forms of rumination. For example, Zikic and colleagues (Zikic & Klehe, 2006; Zikic & Richardson, 2007) found that unemployed participants who engaged in voluntary and purposeful self-reflection and career-reflection (i.e., made sense of their joblessness through deliberate rumination) subsequently obtained high-quality reemployment. Using a more formalized mechanism for self-reflection, Spera, Buhrfeind, and Pennebaker (1994) invited unemployed men to engage in a five-day expressive writing program where participants were encouraged to write about their job loss experiences, express their emotions, and reflect on life changes that had occurred as a result of unemployment. Compared to two control groups (who were asked to write about their plans for the next day or who did not engage in any writing), the expressive writing group had significantly higher rates of reemployment three months later, and this difference continued over the eight-month duration of the study. Spera et al. (1994) proposed that expressive writing “helps the traumatized person attain a perspective on the experience” (p. 722), because putting words to the experience helps people organize and give meaning to the job loss, which prompts closure and allows them to move on. Expressive writing is a form of voluntary and purposeful reflection that seeks to understand events and their implications and is therefore aligned with deliberate rumination, which is also voluntary, purposeful, reflective, and meaning making.

These results suggest that unemployed people may benefit by participating in programs that allow for dialectical thinking and encourage deliberate rumination. However, before unemployment assistance programs can be redesigned to more systematically promote positive outcomes, further research is required to investigate whether these two processes—dialectical thinking and deliberate rumination—help people to grow through unemployment.

In the current study, two theoretical frameworks were examined using a deductive qualitative method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to better understand growth during unemployment: Latack and Dozier’s (1986) career growth model, and Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (1995; 1996) PTG theory (improved relationships, new possibilities for one’s life, a greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength and spiritual development). We analyze these positive experiences against the backdrop of the distress caused by unemployment, so that the positive outcomes of PTG can be understood within the context of the trauma itself.

5. Method

We cannot assume that PTG is uniform in people who lose their jobs or that it operates in the same way as it does for other sources of trauma. For instance, Hefferon et al. (2009) suggested

that the five dimensions of PTG may manifest differently for various types of trauma, such that growth resulting from cancer may be different to growth resulting from the death of a spouse, which again differs from the outcome of an accident. Therefore, we used a qualitative methodology to look for participant-defined meanings given to the lived experience of PTG for these unemployed participants, rather than to test the causes and effects of PTG during unemployment.

5.1 Participants

Criterion sampling, a subset of purposeful sampling, was used to recruit 22 unemployed people for a semi-structured interview. Participants were all job seekers who were clients with Centrelink, an Australian Government body that provides welfare and unemployment benefits.¹ By only recruiting people who were receiving unemployment benefits, we ensured that participants were experiencing similar financial situations. Advertisements for the study were left on the front counter of job search agencies, and participants elected to be interviewed. All participants were paid AUD20 for a one-hour interview.

The sample consisted of 10 males and 12 females. Thirteen of the participants lived in the city of Melbourne and nine lived in regional/rural areas of Victoria, Australia. Professions included teaching, nursing, public service, real estate, artist, vet assistant, IT, farmhand, and landscaping. Participants were aged between 21–67 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.66$; range 21–67). Respondents reported a variety of education levels: 73% had finished high school, 21% had completed university, and 33% had obtained a TAFE (Technical and Further Education, e.g., trade) qualification.² Participants had been unemployed for an average of 7.3 months.

5.2 Interview procedure

Semi-structured interviews took place at job search centers across four metropolitan and three rural locations. Interviews were audio-recorded via an MP3 player and were later transcribed into word files by a research assistant. The interviews covered three broad areas: (a) the negative experiences encountered by each participant as a result of being unemployed, (b) the participant's views on their career as well as plans for the future, and (c) whether the participant felt they had learnt something/grown because of being unemployed.

5.3 Data analysis

Deductive thematic analysis (DTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used. DTA is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). The process involves identifying themes through an iterative process of reading and re-reading the data to find patterns (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997), using a top-down framework (Boyatzis, 1998). We followed an essentialist/realistic approach and manually coded the data by looking for semantic themes that emerged from the explicit/surface meanings of the words provided by participants.

¹The Australian Government provides welfare payments to unemployed people in the form of a “basic living” allowance. Therefore, only those who do not have enough money to pay for the basic necessities of life (e.g., rent, food, bills) are eligible to receive federal assistance. The receipt and amount of federal assistance given by the Australian Government to unemployed people is determined by their assets, savings, and debts. If the unemployed individual is married or in a de facto relationship, then their partner's income, assets, savings, and debts are also taken into account.

²These figures do not add up to 100% because, in Australia, people can complete high school and then go on to TAFE, or they can go on to TAFE without completing high school.

6. Results

Following this methodology, we analyzed all interview text for evidence of the four main themes of distress, growth, deliberate rumination, and dialectical thinking. The major themes and sub-themes are outlined in Table 1 below.

6.1 Theme 1: Distress

Table 2 below contains representative quotes from interview participants that illustrate the distress that they were experiencing due to unemployment. Financial strain and deprivation were evident in all five domains; however, there appeared to be minimal deprivation of collective purpose and enforced activity. Many participants also discussed the depression they had experienced as a result of becoming unemployed. Even those participants who reported that they began their unemployment optimistically said that depression eventually set in. This depression was coupled with a lessened sense of self-worth as a result of losing employment. Job loss was a referent for evaluating their self-identity and place in the community. The constant job rejections fueled a sense of depression, as did the lack of time structure, and a feeling that time had become meaningless, as they had no real way to contribute to society. Interviewees reported that, with unemployment, came the loss of social contacts, and for some it led to negative changes in relationships. They also discussed how the loss of identity, particularly feelings of shame, led them to socially isolate themselves. Participants described their experiences through a number of negative metaphors. These included “professional graveyard,” “battle ground,” “Catch-22,” “career death,” “a black hole,” “no man’s land” and “a jinx.”

In summary, there was convincing evidence that the study participants were experiencing distress as a result of unemployment. The key aspects of distress discussed by participants were depression and financial strain, along with deprivation of time structure, social contact and identity.

6.2 Theme 2: Growth

Table 3 below presents representative quotes relating to the career growth model and PTG theory. There was evidence of both career growth and PTG, with participants’ reflections aligning with the dimensions described by the five-factor model of PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Taku, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2008): improved relationships, new possibilities, a greater appreciation of life, an increased sense of personal strength, and spiritual development. The theme of improved relationships was mentioned the most out of the five dimensions, with typical comments such as, “I do appreciate having more time to spend with friends, and also not being so tired from work all the time means I have energy for my kids,” and, “I feel very privileged that I have people that care and support me.” These comments can be placed in four sub-themes: (a) more time to be with the people they cared about, (b) others providing social support, (c) more energy to focus on other people, and (d) increased gratitude for the people in one’s life.

The theme of seeking out and identifying new possibilities was also very strongly represented in the current sample, specifically with respect to seeking out new career possibilities. The results align with Latack and Dozier’s (1986) and Zikic and Klehe’s (2006) findings that unemployment can provide a career break that allows people to change their career direction.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes analyzed and identified in the qualitative data

Distress	Growth	Deliberate rumination	Dialectical thinking
Deprivation of identity	Improved relationships and gratitude	Consciously engaging in self-reflection	The co-existence of loss and gain in relation to self-identity
Deprivation of shared contact and social relationships	New possibilities for one's life and career growth	Awareness of vulnerability and feelings of injustice	Job vulnerability paradoxically leading to career ownership
Deprivation of a feeling of collective purpose	A greater appreciation of life		
Deprivation of enforced activity	A greater sense of personal strength		
Deprivation of time structure	Spiritual development and heightened compassion for unemployed people		
Financial strain			
Depression			

Table 2. Evidence of distress in study participants

Distress

Sub-theme 1: Deprivation of identity

“After a while you start to question your own self-worth. Like, maybe all those companies who turn me down are onto something.”
“It’s just knock-back and knock-backs shattering your confidence.”
“It’s like you lose this core part of who you are. Someone takes it away from you without your permission.”
“Unemployment has such a stigma feel to it.”

Sub-theme 2: Deprivation of shared contact and social relationships

“Yeah, well, ‘cause at some stages when you’re unemployed and you’re just holding on to these little rooms of thought, like you really can’t take people also looking down on you and saying, ‘Oh you should get a job,’ and it’s like, I know that I’m trying, yeah, that’s pretty hard, so you sort of have to separate yourself from those people or otherwise it just goes down from there.”
“Because I live and worked in the same area, I make sure that I am not around the supermarket at 5 o’clock because I just can’t cope with seeing the engineers, the admin officers etc.”
“I’ve started to avoid my friends because I don’t want their pity. I can’t afford to go out with them anyway.”
“It’s changed a lot of relationships I’ve had this year too... I got unemployed and I am looked down upon and kind of turned away from a bit.”
“From the unemployment I found that the people that are employed and working fulltime jobs won’t even give you the time of day most of the time, just ‘cause you’re unemployed. Conversation starters like ‘What do you do’? Or ‘What have you been doing’? And you’re just like, ‘I’ve just been looking for work,’ and people just go, ‘Oh, yeah, just looking for work,’ and they don’t really realize, the interviews, the resumes, the sends-offs the call-ups, all that kind of stuff is stressful when you don’t have a job.”

Sub-theme 3: Deprivation of a feeling of collective purpose

“I’ve been a company man all my life. Now I feel like I am in no man’s land. I am a nobody.”
“It’s terrible feeling when you not contributing to society but sponging off it instead.”

Sub-theme 4: Deprivation of enforced activity

“When you work you’ve got too much to do and it’s stressful. But having nothing to do is also stressful.”
“I’ve got a brain and it’s terrible if you’ve got a brain and you can’t use it... it’s soul destroying.”
“The boredom is mind-numbing. Just having nothing to do with my time. I go stir crazy.”

Sub-theme 5: Deprivation of time structure

“You know you don’t have to wake up in the morning. Nobody’s expecting you anywhere.”
“I got into this habit of sleeping in late and that, which are things that I wouldn’t normally do if I was employed. Just sort of getting into a cycle of staying up late, sleeping in late, even just getting out of that cycle of looking properly for jobs, and just getting like a little bit depressed and not really focusing on my interests or anything.”

“When you’re unemployed you can stay up and watch TV and go to bed at 2am if you want, and at the same time you get into a sort of a habit, you know, it gets you out of sync with the world”.

Sub-theme 6: Financial strain

“The grinding poverty, the never-ending poverty, is bound to take you down. You know, you’re bound to never see any way out of it. I don’t see any way out of this poverty unless I get help from the government.”

“It gets a lot tougher without work. That would probably be the biggest thing. It’s just... ‘cause what you get from the government, you know, you just scrape through with bills and that.”

“It’s frightening having so little money. It rips your whole security away from underneath you.”

Sub-theme 7: Depression

“I have periods where, you know, I get really down. All unemployed people have down days. Sometimes it gets me down because I feel like I am not getting anywhere. Sometimes it feels really hard.”

“The other day, I spent the day in bed. I just couldn’t cope anymore. I just didn’t want to go to any interviews.”

“I was optimistic at first but then after a while I started to feel disappointed, perhaps a little bit depressed but feeling really sorry for myself.”

“It’s like I am in a black hole when I am without work. It’s so depressing.”

Table 3a. Evidence of growth in study participants

Growth

Sub-theme 1: Improved relationships and gratitude

"My son and I have had time with each other that we wouldn't have otherwise had. We've been working on the house together and it has brought us closer together doing this joint project. I guess this is a blessing of being unemployed. I have time to build a relationship with my son, who is an adult now.

"I do appreciate having more time to spend with friends, and also not being so tired from work all the time means I have energy for my kids."

"I feel very privileged that I have people that care and support me."

"You need your friends and family. Being unemployed has made me realize just how important my relationships are. You really see your friends in a new light."

"I am so grateful for my husband during this time. He must be stressed because I'm not earning a wage but he hasn't mentioned money at all. He is super supportive of me and it's made me see how much he loves me for 'me' and not for what I do professionally."

Sub-theme 2: New possibilities for one's life and career growth

"I met a lot of people along this year who were also unemployed who were getting really depressed and down on themselves for being unemployed who did not have anything to hold onto and remind themselves of. Helping them out and saying, 'I'm unemployed too and I know what it's like,' and just being able to be there for people and help out most of the people definitely has made me think I'll train to become a social worker."

"I've always wanted to move into a career in IT and now I think it is time to make this move."

"It's helped me to decide to go back to study and move into the aged-care sector."

Sub-theme 3: A greater appreciation of life

"I appreciate the smaller moments now. Watering the garden. Little mundane jobs like ironing are enjoyable."

Sub-theme 4: A greater sense of personal strength

"Well, I've learned a few things. I've learned more of my personality. If anything, I'm more of a quiet person than what most people used to think. I'm also realizing I am stronger than I thought. I've had to persevere at a lot of different options since leaving school. It has tested me."

"I can control what happens to me instead of letting other people tell me where I should go. Take a bit of control and have a go."

"From now on I don't want to have to compromise my happiness and I want to be able to feel good about going to work too, to feel good about the people I work with, and I want to have the knowledge that they enjoy working with me as well."

"I don't need a job to be somebody. My confidence should not rest on whether I work or who I work for."

"I have learnt that I need to create my own career."

Table 3b. Evidence of growth in study participants

Growth

Sub-theme 5: Spiritual development

"I used to think success was doing well in your job and being rewarded financially, of course, but now I have opened up to new ideas of success. It's more about finding meaning in your life, whether that is through your job or other ways."

"I am sad to admit that I used to think of unemployed people as 'slackards' but now I realize that this is not the case. Most people don't choose to be unemployed, and I am working harder now trying to find a job than when I was working."

"Being unemployed has given me a real sense of compassion for people with no choice in this situation."

"I've realized that we don't always have control over our employment and I am no longer judgmental of people in the unemployment line."

"Anyone can end up in this situation. There were some people there, they were asking people to introduce themselves whatever, and there were a couple of people there who were actually professionals. There was a guy there who was a really good musician. I knew about this band... He wasn't an idiot, but anyone can end up in that situation."

"I send my heart out to anyone who is unemployed. It takes such an emotional toll, and you, you know, you have to be strong to survive it."

The third domain of posttraumatic recognition of personal strength also emerged through participants who reported that they had developed a greater sense of personal strength and self-determination. A few people also commented that they have a greater focus on making choices that lead to their own happiness (rather than pleasing others) and are less concerned about other people's opinions

In relation to spirituality, study participants discussed a newfound compassion for other unemployed people. Participants who were previously judgmental of unemployment, who thought that it was somehow an easy experience or was opted into by choice, had expanded their perspective of the situation. They realized that unemployed people are not lazy, that reemployment/finding a new job requires a lot of effort, and that unemployment is often not within one's own control.

In summary, there was evidence that the study participants experienced career growth across all five domains of PTG during unemployment.

To this point, the data has been presented according to established dimensions of the four theories put forward in the introduction of this paper: Fryer's (1992) financial-restriction theory, Jahoda's (1981; 1988) latent deprivation theory, Latack and Dozier's (1986) career growth model, and Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004a) PTG theory. However, the experience of PTG is one where trauma and growth co-exist, and, indeed, where trauma is transformed into growth. Wong (2011) argues that negative experiences can motivate us toward positive change. The next stage of our analysis therefore aimed to identify evidence for two *processes* that allowed participants to transform distress into growth—dialectical thinking and deliberate rumination.

6.3 Theme 3: Dialectical thinking

Data analysis revealed evidence of dialectical thinking, comprising two sub-themes: (a) the co-existence of loss and gain in relation to self-identity, and (b) job vulnerability paradoxically leading to career ownership. Although the experience of unemployment challenged participants' sense of self-worth, through this challenge they also reported benefits such as greater clarity about their motivations/key drivers, the courage to allow oneself to change career path, a sense of strength and resilience, and a new method of self-reflection.

Having one's assumptions of a fair and loyal employer dismantled was difficult for some participants. However, it caused them to open themselves up to new work experiences. Two people made the decision to set up their own businesses, two people decided to pursue a career in art, four people decided to retrain themselves, and a number of others were considering new career pathways. These participants all felt that they would ultimately be happier with a new career than their previous jobs. However, they only explored these new possibilities after the painful process of giving up the assumption that employers would take care of them. Even among those participants who did not choose to change career direction, many spoke of no longer being shackled to an employer, and instead taking on a new, more independent, self-governed approach to their career.

6.4 Theme 4: Deliberate rumination

Deliberate rumination, a voluntary, reflective type of rumination, was evident among study participants. Deliberate rumination is a process of "seeking meaning or more global understanding of the self" (Cann et al., 2011, p. 139).

Table 4. Evidence of dialectical thinking in study participants

Dialectical thinking

Sub-theme 1: The co-existence of loss and gain in relation to self-identity

“Leaving my job was a very, very hard thing to do. I was terrified but it was very cathartic too because occasionally you have to terrify yourself to death to actually move on psychologically, I think so... you just have to have that whole upheaval and you think, ‘Well, I can do that,’ so if I can do that, why wouldn’t I do that?”

“Being unemployed, even though I was busy, having to go to Centrelink and saying, ‘Yes, yes,’ [to job interviews] wasn’t what I call fun but it did clarify my key drivers for me. I have a better sense of what I will and will not do now.”

“It made me realize I am stronger than I think and stronger than they think because ‘getting through’ unemployment is much tougher than ‘getting through’ the daily grind of work.”

“I had to let go of the old me, and that was painful, but now I am ready to start fresh and I feel that if it had not been for losing my job, I would not have been forced to think anew.”

“It’s a weird experience because you lose money and you lose that feeling of being important and it makes you feel like crap, but then, after a while you realize you still have plenty of good things left in your life and some of those good things have only resurfaced because you’ve had time to notice them.”

Sub-theme 2: Job vulnerability paradoxically leading to career ownership

“If I had been employed I wouldn’t have even tried probably to start my own business... I went for Company B when Company A got rid of me. Then I went back to Company A and thought, ‘Well, I can help you in the future with what I have learnt.’ ... Then they got rid of me and I thought, ‘Bang! I can do this myself.’”

“No one wants to be unemployed but it makes you think about your life and reflect and say it is time to take charge of my own career.”

“Being without work at that point was kinda good ‘cause it gave me time to host the exhibition. Unemployment let me express myself with art. Like, there was an article written about me in one of the magazines. It was a new experience for me.”

Table 5a. Evidence of deliberate rumination in study participants

Deliberate rumination

Sub-theme 1: Consciously engaging in self-reflection

“I have to be aware of this, this is a conscious effort for me to understand myself and my values, but sometimes the only way to do this is to stop doing it and then these little epiphanies happen.”

“I read a lot, I do a lot in my journal, I do a lot of noticing, a lot of reflecting and writing really exerts pressure on me.”

“I think it’s about redefining myself. I think it’s an opportunity to continue to redefine myself and who I am. So therefore I need to know ‘who I am’. So it’s been a double challenge and I think for someone like me that doesn’t have children, I have the luxury to focus on what I am about but it’s a hard one too.”

“It’s brought me greater clarity of self.”

“Unless you branch off and explore, like, and go off and dream about other jobs, other avenues in life that might make you feel good about yourself because you might get something else happen, as in, like, success or not.”

“That was a soul-searching exercise for six months.”

“You’ve got as much time as you like to be able to sit down and think about who you are and where you want to go.”

Sub-theme 2: The co-existence of loss and gain

“Leaving my job was a very, very hard thing to do. I was terrified but it was very cathartic too because occasionally you have to terrify yourself to death to actually move on psychologically I think so...you just have to have that whole upheaval and you think, ‘Well, I can do that,’ so if I can do that, why couldn’t I do that?”

“Being unemployed, even though I was busy, having to go to Centrelink and saying, ‘Yes, yes,’ [to job interviews] wasn’t what I call fun but it did clarify my key drivers for me. I have a better sense of what I will and will not do now.”

“It made me realize I am stronger than I think and stronger than they think because ‘getting through’ unemployment is much tougher than ‘getting through’ the daily grind of work.”

“I had to let go of the old me, and that was painful, but now I am ready to start fresh and I feel that if it had not been for losing my job, I would not have been forced to think anew.”

“It’s a weird experience because you lose money and you lose that feeling of being important and it makes you feel like crap, but then, after a while you realize you still have plenty of good things left in your life and some of those good things have only resurfaced because you’ve had time to notice them.”

Table 5b. Evidence of deliberate rumination in study participants

Deliberate rumination

Sub-theme 4: Awareness of vulnerability and feelings of injustice

“I have always been a trusting person but now I know you can’t trust anyone. Recruiters say they’ll call you back and they don’t. I have realized how little control I have over the whole job hunting process.”

“I used to feel safe. Now I don’t anymore.”

“When my company downsized they got rid of all the long standing employees. So much for rewarding company loyalty! The young ones can easily get another job but it’s us older people that will find it hard to get new work. It seems very unjust what they did to us. I thought we had a relationship but in the end I was just another number.”

“Then I email them back asking how and why I can improve my resume and letter of application. I get emails back saying, “I honestly don’t know. I didn’t read your resume or application.” “We got 80 responses and I had to come to a decision within 3 days.” Makes me feel great! I have no idea what I am doing or wonder why the hell I am even applying because it just feels like a lottery. She said she just picked 4 random people and chose one out of those 4. It feels very much like I am not being heard again. It feels like it’s all a luck game not a skills thing, which bothers me.”

“I gave up my spare time, I came in on holidays, I missed my kid’s school plays because I thought I would be rewarded in the end. Turns out I was kidding myself or maybe they were kidding me because it turns out my reward was a pink slip.”

In the current study, participants talked about their attempts to understand their experiences, the reactions of others, the employee-employer relationship, and who they were more globally when they did not have their professional identity. Their comments reveal how unemployment had prompted them to think more deeply about their relationships, their career pathways, their lives, and their identity. A number also talked about how being unemployed had given them the time and opportunity to become more self-reflective.

When analyzing the interview transcripts, we found that deliberate reflection reaped a number of positive benefits, including greater self-clarity, a stronger desire to find work that would lead to happiness, and a feeling of self-control.

7. Discussion

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) describe PTG as “the gains that result from the struggle with loss” (p. 158). In the current study, the topic of inquiry was job loss. The results showed that job loss led to other losses, including loss of income, time structure, identity, social contact, close relationships, purpose, routine, and career safety. This loss was connected to depression and shame. These results are consistent with a large body of literature showing that unemployment is a traumatic experience (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Wanberg, 2012). Therefore, it is clear that careers counselors need to assist unemployed people to understand and alleviate their distress.

However, careers counselors can also explore the possibility of assisting their unemployed clients to grow from the distress. The results demonstrated that unemployment is associated with PTG, with participants reporting improved relationships, new life possibilities (particularly new career options), and a greater sense of personal strength from overcoming the challenges that unemployment had presented. These findings are consistent with a growing body of literature that shows that people can find benefits following other life challenges (Hefferon et al., 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Taku et al., 2008).

We found a small amount of evidence of growth in spirituality and appreciation of life. As one participant stated, “No one wants to be unemployed but it makes you think about your life and reflect and say it’s time to take charge of my own career.” Many said that they had a newfound compassion for other people who experience unemployment. This suggests that their perspective on job loss and the plight of others had changed, and may indicate a shift in understanding that underpins spirituality.

Importantly, the results showed that experiences of distress and potential growth co-occur and are not mutually exclusive. The present study supports the conclusion that “the presence of growth does not necessarily signal an end to pain or distress, and usually it is not accompanied by a perspective that views the crisis, loss, or trauma itself as desirable” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a, p. 7; see also Baker, Kelly, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2008). This idea was captured by one participant’s statement that “it’s been the worst experience and the best all mixed up into one.” As illustrated in Table 2 above, unemployment is undoubtedly a traumatic experience. But because this study did not limit its focus to unemployment trauma, we have learned that participants then reformed themselves into more confident and self-reliant people.

Indeed, participants expressed somewhat paradoxical views on self, careers and relationships, and this dialectical thinking appeared to support their growth. For instance, they identified the goodness in some relationships, but also discussed the shame that other people made them feel. They talked about losing their identity through unemployment, as well as how this loss allowed them to think differently about themselves. Participants also found acceptance of career vulnerability to be a trigger for more self-reliance. These findings support Tedeschi and McNally’s (2011) argument that dialectical thinking aids the process of PTG.

The process of growth was also aided by participants' ability to engage in deliberate rumination, a style of positive rumination that attempts to understand the event, rebuild beliefs, and use the crisis as an opportunity for growth. Again, they drew upon informative metaphors to describe their experience of unemployment. Unemployment was likened to a "pilgrimage," an "opportunity," "setting a compass for my life," "a gift," "a transformational time," "a window," "a blessing," and a time of "soul-searching." For some, unemployment was a time for redefining who they were, what career they wanted to pursue, what measures they would use to determine success, and the importance of happiness and control in one's life. Our findings also bolster the arguments of Cann et al. (2011) about how deliberate rumination is a helpful process in allowing people to make meaning of their trauma.

Deliberate rumination allowed people to challenge their previously held beliefs of self-worth and of a just world. Importantly, the rupture of these beliefs enabled people to rebuild themselves, forming a new reality in which they felt more awakened and better prepared for their future career.

7.1 Methodological considerations and future suggestions

The conclusions of this study need to be considered against our methodology. The deductive design adopted in this study means that we commenced with theory — general abstractions about what constitutes distress during unemployment and what could constitute growth—to look at whether unemployed people in our study experienced the duality of distress and growth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hyde (2000) argued that the adoption of formal deductive procedures represents "an important step for assuring conviction in qualitative research findings" (p. 84) because it allows researchers to assess the validity of the concepts and their relationships. Alternatively, data that disconfirm the relationships can provide an opportunity for theory refinement (also see Yin, 1994). The deductive approach allowed us to provide evidence for the dual existence of distress and growth in our sample and to identify specific dimensions of PTG.

However, starting our analysis with an a-priori theory may have blinded us to other findings in the data. Therefore, after looking for our theory-imposed themes, we also identified another more inductive theme related to the nature of wellbeing identified by participants. Specifically, when participants spoke about moments of wellbeing during unemployment, they drew an intuitive distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. Participants mentioned hedonic experiences such as feeling good, being happy, or experiencing pleasure, such as sleeping in, working in the garden, or cooking a nice meal. Participants distinguished these wellbeing experiences from more eudaimonic pursuits that extended beyond pleasure towards deeper outcomes such as self-awareness and meaningful relationships. Although interviewees linked this later conceptualization of wellbeing to PTG, it is also possible that hedonic moments, while not necessarily leading to growth, could help diminish distress in the moment. This latter point is currently speculative, but represents a promising future research direction (see Synard & Gazzola, in press).

Now that this qualitative study has shown that PTG theory has relevance during unemployment, future researchers can conduct quantitative, survey-based research that applies the PTG inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) to large samples of jobless people. This type of research will aid in the generalizability and utility of PTG theory during unemployment. Researchers can study the influence of individual variables that may promote growth during unemployment, such as explanatory style, resilience, grit, and mastery, together with ecological variables such as social support, income assistance, and labor market opportunities. They could also investigate whether unemployment triggers all five growth domains to a similar extent, or

if only certain domains are more likely to show growth, as was found in the current study. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how growth does, or does not, unfold over time. Finally, it would be of value to examine the extent to which growth during unemployment predicts reemployment success.

7.2 Practical implications

Many unemployment assistance programs focus on minimizing distress. The present findings suggest that a more nuanced approach is needed and that the distress experienced during unemployment, if reflected on in a deliberate and volitional way to cope with and make sense of the experience, can be a source of growth. Wong (2011) states that:

the challenge for psychologists is to help people achieve the optimal level of well-being in spite of the difficulties and pains they are going through. The psychology of well-being needs to focus more on the positive potential of transcending and transforming negative emotions. (p. 75)

Practitioners could guide people through the process of deliberate rumination by encouraging self-reflection through techniques such as emotional expression exercises, mental imagery, and mindfulness. Unemployment counselors could offer a structured series of questions for expressive writing around Tedeschi and McNally's (2011) recent five-part model for enhancing growth. That is, unemployed participants can be encouraged to write, a process that assists in: (a) understanding the trauma, (b) fostering emotional regulation, (c) engaging in constructive self-disclosure, (d) creating a narrative with the five PTG dimensions, and (e) developing robust life principles to cope with challenges.

Practitioners could also develop a strengths approach by using Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths framework as tool when working with unemployed clients. By adopting a well-validated framework, counselors can guide clients through a strength-based appraisal, helping people to more clearly and systematically explore how their strengths can be used to overcome the negative experiences (e.g., financial strain, lack of routine) and make the most of the positive experiences during unemployment (e.g., more time and energy to devote to relationships, openness to new career pathways).

The recommendation for a strength-based approach is based on evidence in the current study that the stress and challenges of unemployment connected participants to their inner strengths. Often they were unaware of these while previously employed. Our finding is consistent with Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andrea, and Seligman's (2008) evidence of a positive relationship between the number of life challenges experienced and the cultivation of character strengths. This also confirms Linley and Joseph's (2004) argument that the experience and survival of trauma teaches life lessons capable of shaping strength in character.

Practitioners might also promote PTG by helping clients to cultivate positive emotions. Gratitude and compassion were two prominent positive emotions reported by participants. Following Fredrickson's (2001) broaden and build theory, careers counselors can seek to cultivate their clients' positive emotions, helping them to find reasons to feel positive at the time of consultation, as well as developing these feelings into broader coping techniques (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Other positive emotions evident in our sample included pride in the discovery of inner strengths, as well as love for people in the participants' support networks. Positive emotions are known to enhance one's coping resources, relational resources and problem solving abilities—all of which would be helpful during unemployment (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

8. Conclusion

This preliminary study investigated how people experience distress and growth during unemployment, and whether there was evidence for the idea that this distress can be a trigger for growth. We found that positive gains can be made, despite the negative situation of unemployment, opening up the possibility of further research and practice that adopts a positive psychology approach to unemployment. The current findings pave the way for future research and interventions that focus on how we can harness and transform trauma into growth in unemployed people.

Authors

Lea Waters
The University of Melbourne
l.waters@unimelb.edu.au

Gabriel Strauss
The University of Melbourne

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