

## Post Traumatic Growth from Bullying Experiences

Madhura Ashokkumar<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to understand post traumatic growth among individuals who have experienced bullying during their childhood. This is a qualitative study with a sample size of 6 participants. A semi structured interview was developed for understanding the research question. The data is collected in video call format, through zoom and further transcribed for analysis purposes. Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the data. The results have been discussed with themes described Post Traumatic Growth Theory. The findings of the study suggest that participants show PTG in at least one of the five dimensions explained by PTG theory.

**Keywords:** *Bullying Experience, Post Traumatic Growth*

**J**amey Rodemeyer, a 14-year-old teenager was bullied by his fellow students in school. This led to him dying by suicide. Several hours before, he left several messages online expressing his pain. Bullying is a “repetitive behaviour that is intended to harm and which is characterised by an imbalance of power between a Target and Perpetrator, where it is difficult for the Target to defend himself or herself” (Burke, 2016). Back in 2005, a multinational study investigated the occurrence of bullying in 28 countries across North America and Europe. The results of the study suggested differences in the intensity of the occurrence of bullying, with least severe happening among girls in Sweden and most severe among boys in Lithuania (Due et.al,2005).

Bullying has been a part of our society for decades. However, this behavior is deeply rooted in human civilization. From an evolutionary lens, bullying behaviors were noticed among rodents and other primates. This ancient behavior emerged to provide survival and reproduction advantages. However, we altered its intensity and impact through language and culture. This alteration resulted in many people experiencing trauma. Personality traits of perpetrators of bullying and victims have been identified (Olweus,1995). What happens post these experiences? One way to explain this is Post-Traumatic Growth. Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) is the psychological transformation after the encounter of a stressful event. The term PTG was coined by Richard G Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun. They define PTG as a positive psychological change in the wake of struggling with highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004).

<sup>1</sup>Counselling Psychologist, India

\*Corresponding Author

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The positive transformation of PTG reflects in one or more of the following five areas:

- Embracing new opportunities – both at the personal and the professional fronts.
- Improved personal relationships and increased pleasure derived from being around people we love.
- A heightened sense of gratitude toward life altogether.
- Greater spiritual connection.
- Increased emotional strength and resilience.

Not everyone may experience post traumatic growth. Individual responses and the way we perceive the damaged, guide the way we adapt and learn. Literature suggests that 90% of the trauma victims have reported growth in at least one aspect of PTG (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1990). Post-Traumatic Growth is a positive indicator of recovery and healthy coping.

In this study, I have attempted to understand post-traumatic growth of participants who have experienced bullying (verbal) during childhood. PTG has identified five areas where growth is likely to happen. These five areas have been used as major themes to discuss the findings of the study.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Burke.J, (2016) conducted a study to measure optimism in 2441 participants between the ages of 12-19 across 13 Irish schools. Out of the total number of participants, 312 experienced bullying on a daily basis, while 454 experienced bullying once a month or a week. Bullying was measured using the Corcoran (2013) version and netTEEN questionnaire. Optimism was measured using the children Attributional style questionnaire. The results showed that individuals who experienced bullying scored lower on overall optimism as against to those who have not experienced bullying. Upon further analysis, it was understood that students who experienced bullying on a daily basis reported higher levels of optimism in negative situations. The results suggest that experiences of bullying may have helped participants develop symptoms of post-traumatic growth.

Ratcliff. J et al., (2020) examined bullying as a precursor to PTG. They looked at spontaneous expressions of PTG in response to bullying among 51 adults with visual impairments. This study also looked into the relationship between self-reported bullying severity and PTG in 33 children with visual impairments. Open ended interviews were conducted and was transcribed and coded under 5 domains of PTG as explained by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996). 35% of adults reported experiencing PTG. Children also reported to have positive growth from their experiences.

Andreou, E., et al, (2021) investigated the association between bullying experiences at school, current PTSD symptoms and PTG among Greek university students. A sample of 400 students between the ages of 17 and 40 completed self-report scales measuring school bullying victimization experiences. The results of the study revealed that survivors of bullying experiences showed mild levels of PTSD and moderate feelings of PTG. Female participants reported higher levels of PTG. Duration and frequency of bullying experiences had a significantly influenced PTSD and PTG.

Jamie M., (2017) conducted a study where 139 participants who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community completed a series of questionnaires regarding bullying experiences, outness, social support and PTG. They used Structural equation modelling to

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analyse data. The results showed that. Individuals who were bullied for their sexual orientation experienced more PTG. Outness predicted increased social support, which further reflects PTG.

Zięba M et al, (2019) studied about the Coexistence of Post-traumatic Growth and Post-traumatic Depreciation in the Aftermath of Trauma using Qualitative and Quantitative Narrative Analysis. 72 participants were asked to recount their experience of trauma and answer questions about how it had affected their thinking about themselves and the world. Participants' narratives were analysed by competent judges and using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count. PTG and PTD can coexist and they can be regarded as outcomes of two separate processes. The study results also suggest that although PTG and PTD can coexist, they may be considered different domains of psychological functioning.

Hong, Soyun, et al. (2021) explored the relationship between workplace bullying and mental health, focusing on the indirect effect of post-traumatic stress responses and moderation of nurses' perception of workplace bullying. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted with 319 Korean nurses; participants were divided into the perceived and non-perceived workplace bullying groups. Moderated mediation models were tested using structural equation modelling with Stata version 16. Regardless of nurses' appraisals, higher levels of workplace bullying were associated with poor mental health. Post-traumatic stress symptoms indirectly impacted the relationship in both groups, but post-traumatic growth did not. The group showed a partial negative association between post-traumatic growth and mental health.

Damon.M (2007), conducted a study on gay men who experienced bullying and assessed them for PTSD and PTG. 90 gay men were recruited from a variety of community. Bullying did result in them experiencing PTSD symptoms and PTG. The results were explained using the minority stress theory. PTG helped to cope with severity of bullying and symptoms of PTSD.

Sim.Y.B (2016), investigated the perception and education need on PTG of college students with school violence experiences. 153 participants were recruited from 4 universities and 2 colleges.93.5% students answered that PTG programmes are necessary. They were looking for ways to improve their self-esteem, stress management, healing and recovery from trauma, improve interpersonal relationships.

Mackenzie.C, et.al, (2020) Investigated facets of posttraumatic growth (PTG) theory, including the nature of the index event, the relationship between suffering and PTG, and prosocial correlates of PTG on Undergraduate students (N = 253). The participants completed measures of PTG and trauma-related, psychopathology/affect, and prosocial correlates. Results showed differences emerged in PTG according to event severity, with greater PTG for those who experienced a trauma compared to a stressor. PTG was associated with nearly all trauma-related, select psychopathology/affect (e.g., anxiety, positive affect) and prosocial (e.g., empathy, volunteerism) variables. In a multivariable model, race/ethnicity, helpfulness, perceived chronicity of distress, and positive affect were associated with PTG. Curvilinear trends demonstrated that moderate chronicity of distress and current emotional distress from trauma were associated with the greatest PTG. Findings of this study, highlight factors associated with growth, including a moderately distressing trauma, positive affect, and prosocial behavior.

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Jensen.K.T, et.al, (2013) looked at the prevalence of PTG among youth who experienced trauma during child hood. The sample included 148 Norwegian youth. The main PTG themes identified personal growth, relational growth and changed philosophy of life. Age was significantly related to reports of PTG. Older participants reported more growth. The findings suggest that PTG is not only possible for youth, but quite similar to that observed among adults.

Taku.K(2020) studies on psychological growth among teenagers after hurting others. Adolescents completed a series of questionnaire. The results suggest that the more deliberately they thought about the incident, they experienced more growth. These findings demonstrate that some factors associated with growth after hurting others tend to overlap with the PTG theory.

Taku.et.al (2012) examined PTG among Japanese youth. A total of 408 youth took part in the study, of which 215 were boys and 193 were girls. This study used Post Traumatic Growth-Inventory for children, subjective severity and rumination scale to measure the variables. ANOVA and Chi-Square were computed for the data collected. ANOVA showed that growth was reported by those who experienced trauma and Chi-Square revealed that, those who did not experience any adversity were finding it difficult to identify growth.

This study extends L. G. Calhoun and R. G. Tedeschi's (1998) model of posttraumatic growth (PTG), positive change resulting from the struggle with trauma, to children by exploring the construct among youngsters who experienced Hurricane Floyd and the subsequent flooding. After experiencing a major stress, children's competency believes is an indicator of PTG.

Ragger, K., (2019) Ambulance personnel, as well as other emergency services like fire-fighters or the police force, are regularly confronted with experiences of extreme psychological distress and potentially traumatizing events in the line of their daily duties. These members may experience more stress because of the nature of their job. This study focussed on Sense of Coherence and PTG. Using ANOVA, the results suggest a significant association between SOC and development of PTG. The results of this study suggest that growth and stress after critical events are independent from one and another and can co-exist.

## METHODOLOGY

**Aim:** To understand the impact of reading on personality.

**Approach:** The approach used for this research is phenomenology.

### *Objectives*

In this study, we are going to be understanding

- The process in which individuals make meaning out of their bullying experience
- Understand the meaning derived by the participants in relation to theory of Post-Traumatic Growth

### *Participants*

- Between 6 to 8 individuals who have experienced bullying in childhood would be selected for the sample Multiple in-depth interviews would be carried out to understand their experiences with regards to the research question. Sample would be

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purposive, homogenous sampling, all participants who meet the criteria and have had similar experiences would be chosen.

- Participants would be chosen from urban Indian population from Chennai and Bengaluru. Participants between the ages of 18 and 25 would be included in the sample. Participants should be Indians living in India.

### *Methods of data collection*

The study would use in-depth interviews for data collection. An interview guide would be used as an aid. The interviews would be audio recorded but the recordings as well as transcripts would be kept confidential and only the analysis would be used. The recorded audio and the transcripts will be stored on a computer disk which will be password protected.

### *Data analysis*

Thematic Analysis has been used to analyse the data gathered from the interviews.

### **Ethics**

The purpose of the research study will be explained to all the participants

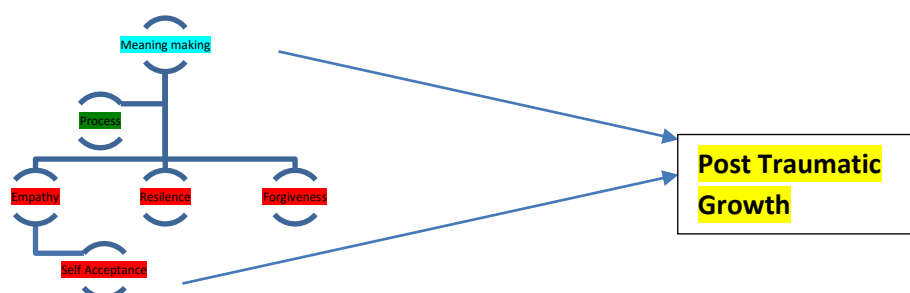
- The informed consent will be obtained from all the participants through Google forms prior to the study.
- The participants will be informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any given point.
- The participants will be informed and reassured that their data and identity will be kept confidential.
- The participants will be informed and assured that there will be no harm done if they participate in the study.
- The participant will be given the supervisor's contact details for any clarification.
- Participants will receive a report of the analysis. Only after their acknowledgement of the same, the analysis shall be submitted for thesis.
- The study has been conducted only after the approval of the Ethics Committee of Montfort College.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, I have looked at what are the meanings that individuals make from their bullying experiences. The participants in this study were mostly between the age groups 22-25. The participants were only woman and are doing or completed their post graduate courses.

Age Range	Number of Participants	Gender
22-25	6	Woman

*Themes:*



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Meaning making typically involves searching for a more favourable understanding of the situation and its implications. This means that meaning making from a situation can be global and situational. The global meaning that the participants derived from their bullying experiences is growth. They were able to see changes in themselves in response to their experience. To quote, participants said *“I don’t take things personally, and I keep moving on”*. Another participant said *“whole experience has not gone into waste, I have acquired a lot of skills and those things are very meaningful”*.

While growth happens to be the global meaning, let us understand the situational meaning derived by the participants from their bullying experiences.

### ***Meaning derived right after the bullying experience***

The participants under my study, reported feelings of anger and helpless after their bullying experiences. Participants said *“initially, I used to just cry,” “anger was the predominant emotion”, “I felt helpless as a child”, “I had feelings of hurt and resent”, “I had a lot of negative automatic thoughts”*. Upon retrospection and other factors they have been able to derive other meanings that are further discussed in this section.

### ***Bullying and ability to empathise***

Dodaj and Barisic (2013), in their study, concluded that there is a negative correlation between bullying experience and ability to empathise. They also mentioned that different components of empathy have differing degrees of influence in direct and indirect forms of violent behaviour. In my study, it was evident that participants felt more empathy towards themselves and others who experienced/experiencing bullying. One participant said *“I should also understand other’s point, that bullying can lower their self-esteem.”*

Another participant said *“when someone goes through that experience, I know what they would feel like and I would help them overcome it”*.

### ***Bullying and forgiveness***

Worthington,et.al, (2019) conducted a study to understand bullying and forgiveness among Adolescents. The results showed that adolescents with higher forgiveness levels bully less. Similarly, forgiveness is negatively related to victimization. In this study participants have not only mentioned about forgiving their bullies but also being able to forgive themselves. A participant said *“I would definitely say that I have forgiven all those people.”* With regard to forgiving oneself a participant said *“I made a mistake and I have made peace with it. I have come out of it.”*

### ***Bullying and self-acceptance***

Participants spoke about how their bullying experience gave them a better understanding of themselves. To quote them, *“I feel more positive, I understand myself and others better”, “I have learned self-acceptance and also accepting others”, “my experience made me into the person that I am today”*. While literature talks about how bullying leads to low/poor self-esteem, participants in this study have reported greater understanding and acceptance of self.

### ***Bullying and Resilience***

Walke and Sapouna, (2013), focussed on resilience of adolescents after their bullying experience. They found that participants did exhibit greater resilience and there was gender differences. They also looked into the supporting factors such as the role of parents and siblings. In this study, participants did mention greater resilience.

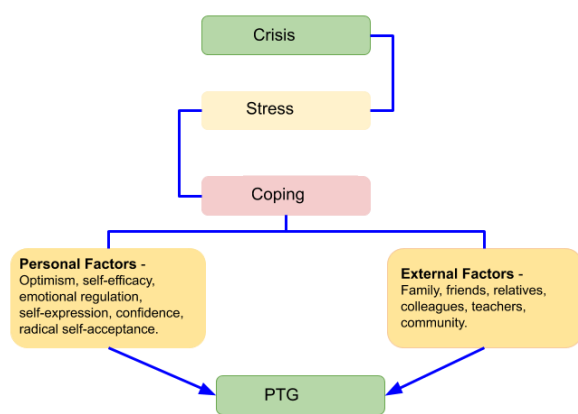
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They said, “a lot of resilience has been built from my experience. I take a stand for myself”, “I have become more patient”, “I am assertive with my communication. I know when I have to move out of the situation and when to respond/react”, “I need to protect myself”.

With regards to resilience we can also understand the research question in relation to post-traumatic growth.

### ***Support and making meaning from bullying experience***

Literature points out that a healthy support system can help heal in a more meaningful way. Participants said “I have been to psychiatrist and therapist, introspection, parental guidance and a sense of solitude” as major supportive factors that helped them make meaning out of their bullying experience. The Model of Life Crisis and Growth highlights the importance of environmental and personal factors in bringing about the positive outcome of stress (Schaefer and Moos, 1992).



The Model Of Life Crisis

M.R.C. (2021, October). *The Model of Life Crisis [Graph]*. <https://Positivepsychology.Com/Post-Traumatic-Growth/>

The above model, helps us understand how environmental and personal factors facilitate post traumatic growth.

### ***Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)***

There are several models of PTG (e.g., Hobfoll et al., 2007; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Pals & McAdams, 2004). However, the most frequently applied model comes from Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006), according to which people experience “positive psychological changes as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (p.1). These positive changes can be obtained in the following five domains:

#### ***1. Perceived changes in self***

After experiencing adverse situations, individuals report feelings of strength, confidence and more self-aware, “authenticity”. They focus on becoming better versions of themselves. Participants in this study said that “it has made me very strong”, “I am able to empathise with others more”. This can be further understood in the context of transformational and homeostasis growth.

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Homeostatic coping is restorative. It brings our body back to its healthy functioning but does not lead to personal development.

Transformational coping brings about cognitive changes. When transformational coping is negative, we are more likely to feel stressed and worried. However, if the transformational coping is positive, it invites a surge of survival instincts, a higher level of recovery, and increased inner strength to sail through the adversity (Schaefer & Moos, 1992).

The participants reported transformational growth.

### **2. Improved relationships**

Relationships strengthen after the adverse experiences. People have a greater understanding of who their true relationships. They also show better empathetic skills with others who may have experienced similar traumatic incidents. A participant recalled *“I used to stand up for other people, other students who were also getting bullied.”*

### **3. Changes in life philosophy**

Post-traumatic growth can also occur when individuals start to reflect upon their mortality as well as meaning in their life. Some people begin to jot down their learnings from the traumatic experience. A participant said *“More than being concerned about why they bullied me, I was curious to understand why they behaved that way. This made want to look at ways to prevent bullying.”*

### **4. Altered priorities**

After the traumatic experience people's priorities are realigned. These changes are reflected on who they want to spend time with. One participant recalled their experience of having bullied others. They discussed ways as to how they will apologise to the ones they hurt. Findings of the study by Taku.K(2020) reflect the same.

### **5. Enhanced spiritual beliefs**

Another significant change might occur in their spiritual beliefs. Growth may also reflect changes in faith and spiritual practises. This also depends on the culture, religion and diversity factors. One participant recalled how their belief shifted from *“god fearing to god loving”*. According to Joseph (2011) approximately 70% of individuals, who have undergone a traumatic event, experience at least one of the PTG symptoms. The analysis done so far, suggest that the participants of this study show signs of post-traumatic growth.

PTG is an outcome of the positive psychology tennet. Although PTG was initially introduced as a psychological theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), it engaged in a myriad of positive psychology models and interventions in the last two decades (Collier, 2016). According to Seligman, PTG is not merely a by-product of trauma; it acts as a catalyst to bring about the cognitive restructuring that helps us grow as better human beings (Fredrickson, 2004). Growth from trauma, helps us protect ourselves from a severe mental breakdown. The impact of stress and grief on the body, mind and brain are reduced. Literature reflects those individuals who experienced PTGS had more satisfactory life and enhanced quality of life (QoL). Interventions such as SMART (Stress Management and Resiliency Training) or MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), showed that survivors who underwent PTG were more self-focused than other subjects (Sood, Prasad, Schroeder, & Varkey, 2011).



### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that there is growth after traumatic experiences and individuals make meaning out of their experiences in a ways that promote their growth, wellbeing and over all functioning. The results also suggest that post their bullying experiences participants have a greater sense of self. The study talks about the various changes the participants saw in themselves after their bullying experience. These have been discussed in terms of the various themes that emerged from the data. I have looked at empathy, resilience, forgiveness, sense of self and spirituality as the major themes. These themes have been studied in relation to the post-traumatic growth theory.

#### *Limitations*

This study focuses only verbal bullying experiences. Within bullying there are various forms. I haven't looked at other forms of bullying. The participants are young adults and thus the meaning they make will be from their current knowledge position. The study includes only participants from Chennai and Bengaluru. Cultural and spiritual dimensions that help make meaning after an adverse experience haven't been looked into in detail.

#### *Future Recommendations*

Further studies can focus on any specific form of bullying and other traumatic experiences. Based on the existing literature, studies can also design and test the efficacy of the post traumatic growth programs. We can also conduct a similar study among other age cohorts and consider spiritual and cultural influences.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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