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Post-Traumatic Growth Among Exonerees: Exploring Transformative Experiences After Incarceration

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Article abstract

Exonerees face numerous barriers to reintegration following their release from wrongful imprisonment. To cope with the challenges they face after exoneration, they draw support from a wide range of external and internal resources, assisting them on their path towards self-sufficiency and resilience. In a study about life after exoneration through in-depth interviews with 26 exonerees, we explored the challenges of reentry for exonerees as well as strategies for success. Although none of the exonerees in our study reported finding closure (and most felt it was not attainable), some experienced what has been described in the academic literature as post-traumatic growth, indicating that although the damage wrought by the injustice of wrongful conviction and incarceration cannot be fully healed, some individuals have transformed their experiences into positive personal accomplishments. In this paper, we highlight the transformative experiences of exonerees as they re-established their lives post-release and consider how systems can provide the resources necessary to support post-traumatic growth.

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Post-Traumatic Growth Among Exonerees: Exploring Transformative Experiences After Incarceration

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Exonerees face numerous barriers to reintegration following their release from wrongful imprisonment. To cope with the challenges they face after exoneration, they draw support from a wide range of external and internal resources, assisting them on their path towards self-sufficiency and resilience. In a study about life after exoneration through in-depth interviews with 26 exonerees, we explored the challenges of reentry for exonerees as well as strategies for success. Although none of the exonerees in our study reported finding closure (and most felt it was not attainable), some experienced what has been described in the academic literature as post-traumatic growth, indicating that although the damage wrought by the injustice of wrongful conviction and incarceration cannot be fully healed, some individuals have transformed their experiences into positive personal accomplishments. In this paper, we highlight the transformative experiences of exonerees as they re-established their lives post-release and consider how systems can provide the resources necessary to support post-traumatic growth.

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I Introduction

According to the National Registry of Exonerations (2022), there have been more than 3,250 documented exonerations since 1989.[1] Research on the reentry experiences of exonerees indicates they face numerous obstacles to reintegration.[2] Spending time in prison disrupts educational attainment and work histories, fractures social bonds with family members and friends, disconnects individuals from a rapidly evolving society, and contributes to ongoing mental health challenges.[3] Furthermore, because expungement is not automatic following exoneration,[4] exonerees also face discrimination in the job market due to the conviction that remains on their record and doubt over their innocence.[5] Since they wait anywhere from several months to several years for their records to be expunged, the challenges of applying for jobs or public assistance are exacerbated.[6] While some exonerees receive compensation, not every state has automatic compensation laws, and in those that do, exonerees sometimes wait several years to receive compensation.[7] These financial barriers are made even worse because exonerees are often excluded from the supports received by other returning citizens through parole agencies and reentry organizations.

Individuals who are wrongfully convicted also experience the added effects of the miscarriages of justice. For one, exonerees are often released abruptly with little preparation compared to other formerly incarcerated individuals. In addition, many experience stigma after

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[1] *National Registry of Exonerations*, online: <www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/ detaillist.aspx> retrieved June 20, 2020.

[2] Shlosberg, Amy et al. "They open the door, kick you out, and say 'go': Reentry challenges after wrongful imprisonment" (2020) 1:2 WCLR 151.

[3] Alexander-Bloch, Benjamin et al. "Mental health characteristics of exonerees: A preliminary explanation" (2020) 26:8 Psychol Crime Law 733; Brooks, Samantha K and Neil Greenberg. "Psychological impact of being wrongfully accused of criminal offences: A systematic literature review" (2021) 61:1 Med Sci Law 1; Campbell, Kathryn & Myriam Denov. (2004) "The burden of innocence: coping with a wrongful imprisonment" 46:2 Canadian J Criminology and Crim Just 101; Grounds, Adrian. "Psychological Consequences of Wrongful Conviction and Imprisonment" (2004) 46:2. Can. J Criminol. Crim. Justice 101; Konvisser, Zieva Dauber. (2015). 'What happened to me can happen to anybody'- women exonerees speak out" (2015) 3:2 Tex Law Rev 179; Wildeman, Jennifer, Michael Costelloe & Robert Schehr. "Experiencing Wrongful and Unlawful Conviction" (2011) 50:7 J Offender Rehabil 385.

[4] Cook, Kimberley J & Saundra D Westervelt. (2018). "Power and accountability: Life after death row in the United States" in Walter DeKeseredy and Molly Dragiewicz, eds, The Routledge Handbook of Critical Criminology, 2nd ed (Oxford: Routledge, 2018); Shlosberg et al, *supra* note 2.

[5] Kukucka, Jeff, Heather K Applegarth & Abby L Mello. "Do exonerees face employment discrimination similar to actual offenders?" (2020) 25:1 Legal Criminol Psychol 1; Shlosberg et al, *supra* note 2.

[6] Shlosberg et al, *supra* note 2.

[7] Cook & Westervelt, *supra* note 4; Norris, Robert J. "Assessing compensation statutes for the wrongly convicted" (2012) 23:3 Crim Justice Policy Rev 275.

exoneration,[8] and psychological trauma that might be different from what other returning citizens experience because they were removed from society for crimes they did not commit.[9]

Despite the obstacles, research suggests that exonerees are supported in a variety of ways and some are even able to find meaningful experiences after release from prison.[10] Positive transitions may also be affected by post-release social networks, including connections to family members and friends[11] and religious/spiritual affiliations.[12] Some exonerees also find it beneficial to talk about their experiences to cope with their trauma.[13] Attending exoneree meetings may provide opportunities for exonerees to form bonds and provide them a sense of community and belonging. In addition, they may learn how other exonerees overcame challenges after returning to the community.[14] Exonerees may also find meaning through their involvement in the innocence movement and in helping others through advocacy efforts. Prior studies found that some exonerees describe significant personal transformations because of their involvement in criminal justice reform, in supporting other exonerees, and in contributing to their communities.[15]

Meaningful experiences leading to positive change is a theme that emerged in our previous paper on exoneree coping strategies and provided a future direction for our research.[16] Although the exonerees we interviewed experienced many challenges after their return to the community,[17] there are also many exoneree success stories. In this paper, we expand on our previous work to further explore the personal transformations experienced by exonerees in our study. For some, the changes they described seem to be consistent with post-traumatic growth (PTG), which is a positive transformation that occurs following a traumatic event that alters an individual's core

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[8] Clow, Kimberley A & Amy-May Leach. "After innocence: Perceptions of individuals who have been wrongfully convicted" (2015) 20:1 Legal Criminol Psychol 1; Clow, Kimberley A & Amy-May Leach. "Stigma and wrongful conviction: All exonerees are not perceived equal" (2015) 21:2 Psychol Crime Law 100.

[9] Brooks & Greenberg, *supra* note 3; Grounds, *supra* note 3; Westervelt, Saundra D & Kimberley J Cook. Life After Death Row: Exonerees' Search for Community and Identity (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

[10] Nowotny, Jordan et al. "Survival, self-sufficiency, and repair: Reentry strategies and resources for wrongfully convicted people" (2022) 28:9 Psychol Crime Law.

[11] Konvisser, Zieva Dauber. "Psychological consequences of wrongful conviction in women and the possibility of positive change" (2012) 5 DePaul J Soc Just 179; Westervelt & Cook, *supra* note 9.

[12] DeShay, Rashaan A. "'A lot of people go insane behind that': Coping with the trauma of being wrongfully convicted" (2016) 29:3 Crim Justice Stud 179; Konvisser (2012), *supra* note 10.

[13] Konvisser, Zieva Dauber & Ashley Werry. "Exoneree engagement in policy reform work: An exploratory study of the innocence movement policy reform process" (2017) 33:1. J Contemp Crim 4; Konvisser (2012), *supra* note 10.

[14] DeShay, *supra* note 12; Szyszko, Adam T. (2018). Chronicles of A Death Row Exoneree: Life Prior, During, and After a Wrongful Conviction.

[15] *Ibid*; Konvisser (2012), *supra* note 10; Konvisser & Werry, *supra* note 12.

[16] Nowotny et al, *supra* note 10.

[17] See Shlosberg et al, *supra* note 2 for an in-depth exploration of reentry challenges for exonerees.

beliefs.[18] While other scholars found evidence of PTG among wrongfully convicted individuals,[19] research on this phenomenon is lacking. The current study aims to deepen our understanding of PTG for exonerees. Identifying the types of resources, supports, and experiences that promote positive transformations in exonerees could help to develop initiatives that promote sustainable change and opportunities for a better future for these individuals.

II Post-Traumatic Growth Literature Review

For many individuals, traumatic events lead to a series of negative outcomes and long-term difficulties including post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic anxiety, sleeplessness, isolation, and depression.[20] Others, however, use these experiences as catalysts for change with regard to personal improvement and development, a phenomenon known as post-traumatic growth (PTG). This concept was coined within the field of psychology and it is defined as a positive transformation that occurs following, and sometimes because of, traumatic events.[21] These positive effects may be attributed to overcoming a struggle that results when an individual has a change in beliefs about themselves and the greater world.[22] These could include, but are not limited to, a greater appreciation for life, closer relationships, increased personal strength, positive spiritual change, and recognition of new possibilities.[23] When this coping is positive, it may lead to a higher level of recovery and increased inner strength.[24] Some who experience PTG may develop a new understanding of themselves and the world they live in, relate to others differently, and have a new outlook for their future.[25] PTG tends to be associated with both social support and effective coping strategies.[26]

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[18] Tedeschi, Richard G & Lawrence G Calhoun. "The posttraumatic growth inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma" (1996) 9:3 J Trauma Stress 405.

[19] Johnson, Gemma & David W Engstrom. "Judge Learned Hand's haunting: The psychological consequences of wrongful conviction" (2020) 47:1/2 J. Soc. Justice 1; Konvisser (2012), *supra* note 10; Konvisser (2015), *supra* note 3.

[20] Haney, Craig. "Mental health issues in long-term solitary and supermax confinement" (2003) 49:1 Crime Delinquency 1.

[21] Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996), *supra* note 16; Tedeschi, Richard G & Lawrence G Calhoun. "Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and Empirical evidence" (2004) 15:1 Psychol Inq 1.

[22] Dekel, Sharon, Christine Mandl & Zahava Solomon. "Shared and unique predictors of post-traumatic growth and distress" (2011) 67:3 J Clin Psychol 215.

[23] Jayawickreme, Eranda & Laura E R Blackie. "Post-traumatic growth as positive personality change: Evidence, controversies and future directions" (2014) 28:4 Eur J Pers 311.

[24] Schaefer, Jeanne A & Rudolph H Moos. "The context for posttraumatic growth: Life crises, individual and social resources, and coping" in Richard G. Tedeschi, Crystal L. Park & Lawrence G Calhoun, eds, Posttraumatic growth: Positive changes in the aftermath of crisis (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1998).

[25] Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996), *supra* note 16.

[26] Brooks, Matthew et al. "I get knocked down, but I get up again" – A qualitative exploration of posttraumatic growth after multiple traumas" (2021) 25:1 Traumatology 244.

In 1996, Tedeschi and Calhoun developed the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) to assess both post-trauma growth and positive outcomes after a traumatic event. The inventory is a 21-item Likert scale that includes items related to five factors: (1) New Possibilities, (2) Relating to Others, (3) Personal Strength, (4) Spiritual Change, and (5) Appreciation for Life. While the PTGI was initially developed to measure favorable outcomes of a stressful life event, it has also become commonly used as a test that can provide guidance about participants' future actions.[27]

The concept of PTG has only recently been applied to criminal justice research. Some research has applied the PTGI to police officers and first responders.[28] Law enforcement officers are much more likely than the general population to be exposed to a high occurrence of traumatic incidents.[29] These studies typically focus on two main types of potentially traumatic events (PTEs): harm or threat to self or witnessing harm or threat to another individual.[30] Both positive and negative changes can occur after exposure to trauma and occur or co-exist at the same time.[31] Physical, psychosocial, and cultural effects may occur depending on the frequency, intensity, and timing of the trauma[32] or multiple PTEs.[33]

PTG has also been examined in currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Prisoners are reported to experience trauma and life event stressors at much higher rates than the general population,[34] with up to 75 percent of prisoners documented as having had lifetime traumatic experiences.[35] The accumulated effects of trauma, from both before and during incarceration, are

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[27] Cann, Arnie et al. (2010). "Posttraumatic growth and depreciation as independent experiences and predictors of well-being" (2010) 15:3 J Loss Trauma 151.

[28] See Leppma, Monica et al. "Stressful life events and posttraumatic growth among police officers: A cross-sectional study" (2018) 34:1 Stress Health 1.

[29] Karmen, Andrew. Crime Victims: An Introduction to Victimology, 9th ed (Pacific Grove: Cengage Learning, 2016); Ménard, Kim S & Michael L Arter. "Police officer alcohol use and trauma symptoms: Associations with critical incidents, coping, and social stressors" (2013) 20:1 Int J Stress Manag 1.

[30] Chopko, Brian A, Patrick A Palmieri & Richard E Adams. (2018). "Relationships among traumatic experiences, PTSD, and posttraumatic growth for police officers: A path analysis" (2018) 10:2 Psychol Trauma 131.

[31] Cann et al, *supra* note 25; Kunz, Simon, Carolina Fellinghauer & Claudio Peter. (2019). "Measuring posttraumatic growth and depreciation after spinal cord injury: A rasch analysis" (2019) 64:4 Rehabil Psychol 383; Taku, Kanako et al. "Posttraumatic growth (PTG) and posttraumatic depreciation (PTD) across ten countries: Global validation of the PTG-PTD theoretical model" (2020) 169 Pers Individ Differ 1.

[32] Papazoglou, Konstantinos. "Conceptualizing police complex spiral trauma and its applications in the police field" (2013) 19:3 Traumatology 171.

[33] Taku et al, *supra* note 29.

[34] Goff, Ashley et al. "Does PTSD occur in sentenced prison populations? A systematic literature review" (2007) 17:3 Crim. Behav. Men. Health 131.

[35] Pettus Davis, Carrie. "Social support among releasing men prisoners with lifetime trauma experiences" (2014) 37:5 Int J Law Psych 427.

associated with higher rates of mental distress and other negative outcomes.[36] There is, however, a growing body of literature that has identified positive psychological changes following traumatic events[37] that could be applied to this population. For example, Van Ginneken and colleagues examined coping strategies as predictors of PTG in a sample of 365 incarcerated individuals, finding that individuals who sought emotional support were involved in religion and/or tried to find meaning demonstrated PTG.[38]

In research with exonerees specifically, Konvisser discusses the potential for positive changes alongside the lasting effects of traumatization from the wrongful conviction, describing the concept of PTG.[39] Likewise, Johnson and Engstrom interviewed exonerees after release and found evidence of PTG in those they spoke with.[40] Specifically, these authors concluded that some wrongfully convicted people develop greater appreciation for life, stronger social relationships, increased personal strength, positive spiritual change, and recognition of new possibilities in life.

In our own previous qualitative work with exonerees, we discovered positive outcomes that might be described as PTG.[41] Many individuals used their personal struggles and hardships as motivations to become community leaders, pursue advanced college degrees, and share their experiences to raise awareness about justice reform. Many exonerees found meaning through their involvement in the innocence movement or in criminal justice reform, which has several potential benefits. As described by other researchers, exonerees involved in justice movements can become more confident and empowered,[42] form social ties,[43] and establish a sense of community and belonging.[44] For exonerees who become actively involved in criminal justice reform, there may be a greater potential to experience PTG. Here we highlight the ways in which exonerees experienced growth both during and after their incarceration that seem to reflect PTG. Our hope is that by concentrating on these specific narratives, we might better direct local and national support to improve post-prison life for exonerees.

III Data and Methods

The methodology described below is part of a broader project intended to explore and describe the reentry experiences of wrongfully convicted people. The interview protocol,

[36] E.g., Goff et al, *supra* note 32; Maruna, Shadd, Louise Wilson & Kathryn Curran. "Why God is often found behind bars: Prison conversions and the crisis of self-narrative" (2006) 3:2/3. Res Hum Dev 77.

[37] Linley, P. Alex & Stephen Joseph, eds. Positive psychology in practice (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2004).

[38] Van Ginneken, Esther FJC et al. "The Life in Custody Study: The quality of prison life in Dutch prison regimes" (2018) 4:4 J Criminol Res Policy Prac 213.

[39] Konvisser (2012), *supra* note 10; Konvisser (2015), *supra* note 3.

[40] Johnson & Engstrom, *supra* note 17.

[41] Nowotny et al, *supra* note 10.

[42] Konvisser & Werry, *supra* note 12; Szyszko, *supra* note 13.

[43] DeShay, *supra* note 11; Konvisser (2012), *supra* note 10.

[44] Konvisser & Werry, *supra* note 12; Szyszko, *supra* note 13.

description of analysis, and overview of sampling strategy can also be found in the previous publications.[45]

For this study, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 26 wrongfully convicted people over approximately five years (November 2015 - June 2020). We started with broad qualitative questions to build rapport and then narrowed topics depending on the flow of the conversation.[46] Although the interview script was semi-structured, interviews were conversational, and the direction of the interviews were often guided by the respondents. Questions explored incarceration experiences, coping strategies, and preparation for release to explore pre-release experiences. For insight into life after prison, we asked about individual strategies and relationships that may have helped ease the burden of re-entry, involvement with innocence organizations or other support networks, and personal successes after incarceration. Finally, we inquired about processes related to reintegration, repair, and closure. Our goal was to describe understandings and events as richly as possible to arrive at "thick" descriptions of meaning.[47]

We recruited participants initially through professional contacts who are involved with innocence support organizations. After the first round of interviews, we used a snowball sampling approach; these participants recommended others who they believed might be interested in speaking with us. For all interviews, once we obtained contact information, a member of the research team called or emailed the potential respondent, explained the purpose of the study, and provided a consent form. If these individuals expressed interest in participating, a researcher scheduled and later interviewed them in-person or virtually. Each person received $100 for participating in the study. Individuals were included in the study if they were convicted of a crime and later cleared of those charges, or had been released and assumed innocent even though exoneration was not finalized.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and assigned a confidential code number. Coding and analysis were conducted in four steps. In step one, a sub-group of interviews were reviewed to compile a close code outline – a list of concepts and themes represented in the data. In step two, all interviews were coded line by line, where sections of text were assigned descriptive labels and assigned open codes. Once open coding was complete, in step three, data were integrated by grouping open coded segments under the close code outline. Lastly, data were analyzed by comparing the material grouped together to identify patterns, dimensions and relationships among the identified concepts and themes.

When evaluating whether individuals have experienced growth after trauma, psychologists look for positive changes in five areas: (1) relationships with others; (2) seeing new possibilities in life; (3) personal strength; (4) spirituality; and (5) appreciation for life. While change in these areas is typically measured with the PTGI, the Inventory is limited in its ability to explain the process leading up to PTG. In other words, it does not provide an understanding of *why* or *how* individuals experience positive transformations following traumatic experiences. Few studies have

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[45] See Nowotny et al, *supra* note 10; Shlosberg et al, *supra* note 2.

[46] Rubin, Herbert J & Irene S Rubin. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005).

[47] Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973).

looked at PTG through a qualitative lens, particularly in formerly incarcerated individuals and in the wrongfully convicted population specifically. For this current study, we analyzed the interviews for themes related to the five indicators of PTG that are measured with the PTGI.

A. Sample Description

The 26 individuals who were interviewed for this study had been wrongfully convicted and incarcerated between 5 and 28 years, with an average of 18 years. Most participants are male (n = 18, 69.2%) and eight (30.8%) are female. The racial/ethnic breakdown of participants is diverse, with 12 (46.2%) participants who are White, nine (34.6%) who are African American or Black, and five (19.2%) who are Hispanic or Latinx. Most participants were wrongfully convicted of murder (n = 15, 57.7%); other charges included sexual assault, kidnapping, arson, and robbery. Three respondents were given a death sentence and five were sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. The remaining sentences ranged from seven years to life with the possibility of parole. Finally, respondents participated in interviews from across the U.S. with 10 from the Northeast, 4 from the Midwest, 9 from the South, and 3 from the West.

IV Findings

In our previous work that focused on barriers to reentry and coping strategies for exonerees, we found that many exonerees described positive changes that they experienced after surviving their trauma.[48] In this study, we explore these transformations in context of the five areas of PTG among exonerees through in-depth interviews. Furthermore, this research describes the factors related to personal transformation in this unique population. While we did not deliberately explore PTG in our original study, many of the participants described changes that are consistent with PTG concepts.

A. Factor 1 - Relating to Others

On the PTGI, the indicators of *Relating to Others* include, (1) knowing that you can count on people for support; (2) having a greater sense of closeness with others; (3) an increased willingness to express emotions; (4) having more compassion for others; (5) putting more effort into relationships; (6) learning how wonderful people are; and (7) better at accepting that you need others.[49] Many of the exonerees we interviewed discovered through their experience with wrongful conviction that they had people they could rely on for support. In addition, many acknowledged how critically important this support was to their well-being. As a result, they now believe they can count on others to get through difficult times, and they accept that they need others for assistance. In reflecting on the importance of his family and friends, Respondent 6 spoke about the fact that while he still struggles in life, he now knows that he can lean on his support system to get him through.

[48] See Nowotny et al, *supra* note 10; Shlosberg et al, *supra* note 2.

[49] Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996), *supra* note 16.

"I struggled and I still do. I think it would be very, very, wrong for me to sit here and say that I don't have any issues still, um, but I think for me I was lucky. I'll say lucky in a sense that there were a lot of individuals, whether it be on parole or exonerated who didn't have the sort of benefits that I had in terms of family support and friends supporting me while I was in [prison], and people actually helped me when I first got out. In terms of, I.D., identification, you know that kind of thing, so those kinds of things were very important to me. I had no idea how to do these things, so with their support, it really kind of came easy." [R6]

Respondent 6 acknowledged and accepted that he needed support from others, and he seemed confident that he could rely on others when needed. Respondent 9 elucidated on the importance of social support, particularly emotional support and offers of encouragement. "I have six sisters and three brothers… I have like 9 parole officers. My sisters, they monitor me, they call me, "Where you at?" I answer to them. Cause their thing is they wanna make sure I make it. They like the changes I made in life. They wanna make sure it's sustainable. And you know I have friends, my friend since we were 2, 3 years old, he's out here, he's always checking in, "How are you?" You know, a lot of guys I see, that I met while I was incarcerated, I see out here. We still keep each other's backs. But as far as like relationships, home, you know what I'm saying. Especially with my girlfriend, uhh that's amazing within itself. I could talk about that for hours. But…And it's just growth from there." [R9]

It is noteworthy that Respondent 9 used the terms "changes" and "growth" in his narrative as he described the importance of support in his life, suggesting that it had contributed to his personal transformation.

Establishing a sense of closeness with others seemed to contribute to positive transformative experiences for some of the exonerees. The shared experience of wrongful conviction fueled a powerful sense of connection for Respondent 13, who explained the bond she formed with other female exonerees at an event she attended. "There was a group of women, I think there were maybe 15 or 20 women exonerees who were guests there. We just kind of, we had fun, we bonded we, I don't know that a lot came out of it, other than just sort of camaraderie, but it let me see that I wasn't alone in the world [...], nobody will get us like we get each other." [R13]

Respondent 13 elaborated that she believes participating in the innocence movement helped her develop a community with people that share her experiences. Establishing a community with others through shared experiences was beneficial for Respondent 15 as well, who started a non-profit to assist others in accessing support. The respondent stated, "I thought, you know, we can build community and really make a difference."

It is perhaps their willingness to discuss their experiences and express their emotions that allowed some of the exonerees to establish a sense of closeness and build a community with others. Many of the exonerees we interviewed detailed the impact of speaking openly about their trauma. Respondents 14 and 21 both explained that even though it is difficult to talk about their convictions and they still get emotional sometimes, it is therapeutic for them and it gets easier with time. Other respondents agreed that they relive their trauma when they speak about it, but they also used the expressions "healing", "therapeutic", and "cathartic" to describe the positive effects of openly

discussing what they experienced. Additionally, some find it beneficial in that they can raise awareness and educate others.

Respondent 24 described how he struggled to discuss his experience initially, and still does at times, but it encourages his healing while informing others about the issues that contribute to wrongful convictions and helps illustrate what wrongfully convicted individuals endure.
"Well, at first, I used to have a difficult time talking about it. I still do, but I find that it's very healing and also that I want to educate people on what, you know, or my experiences or what I've been through and and how it happens and how, in just one statement, how someone's life can change, you know, and so I feel like, with that, it helps, but at the same time, it's like always reliving it, you know. [R24]

Other respondents agreed that regardless of how it affects them, they feel compelled to speak to others about their struggles. Respondent 7 explained, "I feel like I've got to do something. I know if I don't speak and people know my story, then we can't change anything. About all of us need to speak. But I can't say it ain't hard to my spirit, to me, you know, having to relive it and talk about my case and stuff like that. It's kind of hard, but I know I need to do it." [R7]

These narratives reveal that although it can be difficult to open up to others initially, exonerees who allow themselves to be vulnerable with others are able to access support in ways that are important to both their instrumental and emotional needs. Beyond that, expressing themselves and discussing their experiences may lead to a greater sense of closeness with others, supporting their healing and growth.

B. Factor 2 - New Possibilities

In the process of establishing a new identity, many individuals discover new possibilities that weren't available to them before. Several exonerees described finding new interests and opportunities as a result of their experience with the criminal justice system. The indicators of seeing *New Possibilities* on the PTGI include, (1) developing new interests; (2) establishing a new path; (3) doing better things with one's life; (4) seeing new opportunities that wouldn't have been possible before; (5) more likely to try to change things that need changing. Some exonerees discussed how they used their time behind bars to plan for their futures which opened the door for new opportunities. Respondent 14 utilized his time behind bars to further his education and develop a positive identity.

"I came out a completely different individual. I educated myself while I was in. Sure, they had picked me up from a community college I was attending when I was railroaded but, I was still part of the hood. I was still in the hood. I was still low riding, you know, I was still a crazy young man but, when I was inside, I made the decision. I'm going to do something with my time here. I'm not going to just allow the man, if you will, destroy me. So, I wasn't gonna let time do me, I did my own time, and I made the best of it. So, I came home a completely different individual to the point where some of the people that I grew up with were listening to me and they're like, dude, what happened to you in there? What do you mean? Well, you talk like a white boy. And I said, well, thank you. I'll take that as a compliment. They go, you don't talk the way you used to. I go, I don't want to talk the way I used to. I am grateful that I was able to educate myself." [R14]

Respondent 22 also took advantage of his time in prison to begin rebuilding his life and pave the way for new opportunities post-release. “I mean preparation is everything, I was prepared to rebuild my life inside. I was rebuilding while I was in, I mean, I didn't wait to come home and start rebuilding. I started rebuilding inside and put myself and putting plans together and doing things that I needed to do to to be in a position to put me where I am today. I focused on speaking; I focused on being a motivational speaker. I focused on coming home being a human rights activist, I focused on working for, you know, trying to get wrongfully convicted people’s cases addressed. I focused on trying to get rightfully convicted people's cases addressed and and just be, you know, the best type of advocate I could or activist I could be.” [R22]

Many respondents expressed their desire to participate in advocacy work upon their return to the community, and to use their experiences to fight for justice for others. This may represent a new possibility that is linked directly to the experience of wrongful conviction. The ability to advocate for others seems to provide exonerees with positive transformative opportunities. Respondent 16 detailed how he feels obligated to fight for others.

“I’m mandated. It's no ifs, ands, buts about it. Ah, me personally, yeah, I’m mandated. I have the ability, I guess, to an extent to articulate myself now, I mean, with a certain level of clarity and to be able, I have the story, of course, so I can't remain silent. I can't. I have to support you and the likes of you, and the mission…even if I don't get a chance to see it in my lifetime. Nonetheless, this is something that I have to do in regard to rolling my sleeves up and put my best foot forward, keeping an iron in the fire to try to dismantle and eradicate the injustice, as it pertains to our criminal justice system.” [R16]

In fact, several respondents stated they became interested in studying the law because of their experiences and intended to use their credentials to help others. Respondent 2 was a paralegal at the time of his interview but planned to pursue a law degree with the goal of opening a law firm to assist other exonerees. Respondent 3 was already pursuing a law degree when we interviewed him and plans to practice either constitutional or criminal law. Interestingly, Respondent 3 believes that the reason he is succeeding in school now is because of the focus and passion that he found through his experience with incarceration.

“When I came out, I had a lot of energy, just ready to burst at the seams, so I was able to dedicate myself to school a lot more than I think I would have if I was distracted with all of these other things going on in my life beforehand. Coming out, it was just a lot of energy. Full commitment. So, My GPA picked up. It picked up to a 4.0 for the next year and a half and it was 3.6 before. I came out with a lot more energy and a lot more dedication.” [R3]

In addition to pursuing legal careers, some respondents found other callings that resulted directly from their wrongful convictions. Respondent 12 explained, “I'm trying to get into some kind pf peer counseling where you help recovering addicts and recovering people that just got out of prison, and you help mentor and spend a couple hours with them a day or a week or whatever, and you help them get adjusted, you know, help them with their addiction… and that's something I want to do.” [R12]

C. Factor 3 - Personal Strength

The indicators of *Personal Strength* include, (1) having a greater sense of self-reliance; (2) knowing that you can handle difficulties; (3) better able to accept the way things work out; (4) discovering that you're stronger than you realized. There was a substantial evidence in the narratives of our exonerees that finding their personal strength was a critical aspect of healing and growth. For some, personal strength came from being self-reliant following their release from incarceration. Respondent 12 explained how finding employment after release led to a sense of self-worth, which people often lose when they are convicted and incarcerated. He further explained how finding self-worth opens the door to forgiveness, allowing one to accept their circumstances. "Finding employment gives you that that sense of worth because you're able to take care of yourself. And that's the biggest thing is finding that self-worth, cause you lose it, you lost it when you were found guilty. And you lose that self-worth while you're inside a prison. So, when you come home, you need to find that self-worth. Once you find it, then things become easier, and you've got to find that forgiveness in your heart for yourself. You know, you may hate the system, you may hate the cops. You may hate the prosecutor, your bad attorney, you know, the world for giving you such a raw deal. But again, you got to find that little bit of forgiveness in your heart, cause if you don't, it's going to tear you up inside and will destroy you. And you can't have that. That's the one thing in this world that I know without a shadow of doubt is you've got to get rid of some of that hatred..." [R12]

Others similarly described how the ability to come to terms with the experience of wrongful conviction and accepting the way things are is an important step towards a positive transformation. Respondent 20 explained that while losing 10 years of his life to prison cost him greatly, accepting that he lacked control over what happened in the past enables him to remain focused on the future. "I try to set a precedent as an individual who's positive, that it always doesn't be a negative behind what happened, I had no control over that. Those 10 years cost me, they cost me greatly, there's no monetary value that a person could give me to pay me for those 10 years I spent wrongfully in prison. That one thing that I took out of it is that I have to move forward if I want to live. If I want to, if I actually want to be able to be positive in life and move forward." [R20]

Respondent 2 similarly feels that it is important to leave the past behind in order to move forward. While he did not discuss feeling a sense of closure specifically, he explained that he is not bitter and he tries to accept his circumstances to avoid getting trapped in negative feelings. "Bitter? I'll be honest with you, like I said, most of this stuff I try to trash…I don't want to harp. I don't believe harboring ill feelings, harboring any ill feelings about anything is progressive or it's in anyone's best interest. I think in order for a person to move forward, and just move forward in life you have to kind of accept what happened, accept it and just continue." [R2]

For several respondents, it was evident that the experience of surviving their wrongful conviction, and securing their freedom, made them feel strong and empowered them to move forward and make meaningful life changes. Respondent 21 discussed how his experience taught him patience and transformed the way he interacts with others.

"Oh, I'm definitely a changed man because I used to, you know, I had a real bad temper, I used to snap at the drop of a dime, but I done learn to have patience and you got to have patience in order to get through what I just went through, because if you ain't got no patience, or if you don't

be strong, you through. But, uh, it done changed me a whole lot, I'm more laid back, I'm easier to deal with, I think." [R21]

While Respondent 21 described himself as more patient, it is interesting that two of the female respondents described becoming tougher and more vocal in advocating for themselves and for others. Respondent 11 talked about feeling stronger because of her experience and becoming a fighter for herself and for her family. "It's made me stronger. I don't take any crap from anybody anymore. I know how to fight for everything. When my husband had an aortic dissection on Christmas night 2017 and almost died, I had to be strong for my son… Just having to learn how to fight for everything, not being a pushover. Nobody will ever push me over being able to use the law." [R11]

Similarly, Respondent 17 explained, "I think it's actually made me a stronger person. It's made me be more vocal on things that are wrong. Whether in life, in the criminal justice system, just period, be more vocal on things that need to be changed and the strength I have now it's just, it's unbelievable. I mean, if you knew me when I was in high school, I was so timid, so neat, I never wanted to be seen. I just kind of wanted to be in the shadows and now you know coming out with the documentary and whatnot. I, I had to take on that role. I feel like that was my calling and so I continue that on for today." [R17]

While Respondent 21 indicated that he went from having a bad temper to demonstrating patience, female respondents 11 and 17 described adopting fiercer approaches in their interactions with others. They both explained, however, how they use their new sense of strength to advocate for others. Respondent 16 also discussed how the strength he found through his ability to survive empowered him to be a voice for others.

"I think about my life in the future looking ahead, I think that it's going to be a prosperous future and a prosperous life. I'm putting all of the toxic and negative things way behind me meaning, you know, the certain baggage that one would have collected being in that type of environment because, you know I mean, it's not a five-star hotel…. So, you know, you pick up certain habits and mentality. So, I was fortunate enough to be strong enough to not bring that type of stuff home and say, subject myself to that. I'm moving ahead. I'm looking forward, I'm going to be a voice for those who are voiceless. I'm not saying I'm going to change the world. But what I will do is, I'm going to play my part. And I'm going to try to incite and provoke those who do have the ability to bring about a real meaningful effective change." [R16]

For these respondents it seems that recognizing their personal strength was a catalyst for moving forward, for altering the way they interact with the social world, and for making meaningful life changes that led to transformative experiences.

D. Factor 4 - Spiritual Change

The indicators of *Spiritual Change* include a better understanding of spiritual matters and stronger religious faith. Not many of the exonerees spoke in depth about their faith, but some did believe that it played a role in their exonerations. For example, when asked why he thinks some

individuals get the opportunity to have their case heard (like he did), Respondent 16 attributed his experience to divine intervention.

"Literally, you know, they were just chosen. They were just chosen and that was their faith, that was their decree. That's my belief. Because I can't come up with another scientifically speaking answer other than to say this right here was miraculous. So, you were chosen, so do something about it. So that's why, you know, I take my situation and I use, instead of it being a crutch and a continuous disability for me, I use it as motivation. I use it as fuel, and I say this is God's work. I gotta because just a year ago, mind you, my reality was I supposed to be dying and succumbing to that reality, but I'm not, and then the path and road that I took to get here, it was, some say, the stars lined it up. I go a little further and call it, you know, act of mercy, divine mercy, and that's the only other way I can put it." [R16]

Not only does this respondent's faith help him make sense of how he got to where he is now, his belief that he was "chosen" to receive his freedom motivates him to continue fighting and doing "God's work."

Respondent 20 similarly described being granted his freedom by God, but in addition, he explained how the experience of wrongful imprisonment and fighting for his freedom strengthened his moral convictions.

"...once you are to a point where you in there…you are fighting to prove an injustice is done to you, you get a different mindset. You get a different set of values; you get your own set of morals and principles that you stand by and abide by and that's until the day you regain your freedom by the grace of God. I hope everybody, anyone, that has served a wrongful conviction has the opportunity to prove that they are innocent to the crime they are being accused of." [R20]

In this sense, perhaps the process of post-traumatic growth for exonerees begins before their exoneration if they lean on faith to make sense of their experience and find purpose in it.

E. Factor 5 - Appreciation for Life

The indicators of *Appreciation for Life* include, (1) changing priorities about what's important in life; (2) greater appreciation for the value of one's life; (3) better appreciating each day. While many participants indicated that closure was not something they believed was possible to achieve, they nonetheless were able to establish new priorities and find deeper appreciations for life. In reflecting on his journey after exoneration, Respondent 12 indicated that he overcame the odds in his estimation and achieved things that others wouldn't believe are possible. Furthermore he described himself as very successful.

"Oh, success. I mean, I own my own home. You know, we have newer vehicles in our driveway. You know, I got things that most people wouldn't imagine in the two and a half years. In two years of being home I was able to buy my first home ever. You know, so, successfully I've hit the ground running. I've never looked back, and I continue to want to strive to become better and do things better for myself, my family, for the community, and for other people. So, successfully what I've been doing is just continuing to become better and do better. Cause if I stop now, it will never, you know, I don't want to ever digress. I don't want to ever stop because, again,

I don't want to become one of them statistics that you see of other wrongful convictions. You see other exonerees, they ended up getting back to prison for stupid things, you know, drugs, or whatever. I don't want to be that statistic, you know, statistically, people who do over 15 years in prison, 70% of them go back. I'm never gonna. I don't want to be that statistic to go back to prison cause, again, I don't want to be that person." [R12]

While he clearly achieved some material success, Respondent 12 also seems to have developed a profound appreciation for his freedom, his life, and the value of his life to others. He explained how moving forward and making meaningful contributions to others was critical to avoiding negative coping mechanisms and helped him establish a positive post-release identity.

Other participants also felt a sense of responsibility to others despite the injustice they suffered and reported that stepping up to meet that responsibility allowed them to move forward. Returning citizens typically must re-negotiate their roles within their families which can be a source of stress;[50] however, for some exonerees we spoke with, taking on new roles and responsibilities within their families and communities provided opportunities to make valuable contributions, and might have been pivotal in establishing positive identities post-exoneration. Recognizing that he had to move on with his life because his family needed him, Respondent 21 explained:

"I just made my mind up. I wasn't going to just sit around. I gotta move on. I got kids, you know. Two of my kids, I have kids by different people, and both of their mothers passed away while I was locked up, so they didn't have anybody, so I had to come out here and I can't sit around and worry about what's going and how life done changed. I gotta move on. I got 18 grandkids." [R21]

Respondent 20 also discussed wanting to be strong and to keep fighting for his family in hopes to leave behind a positive legacy. He stated, "I'm a grandfather now, I have children. My children are grown now, you know, so, my legacy is for them." Other exonerees reported feeling a sense of responsibility to their communities in addition to their families and found purpose in giving back to others in need. Respondent 12 explained:

"I'm all about trying to help the community. I want to give back. So many people gave to me [since coming home and since first incarcerated], people have given me so much. I want to be able to give back to them. Because that's the proper thing to do because, in my mind, that's the right thing to do. So many people helped me. And there's other people that are in the same situation that I was in and will continue to be in, and I want to be able to support and help these people if it's in my community, I want to do more in my community. But again, across the country and across the world you know wrongful convictions happen every day. And people are being released almost on an everyday basis for a wrongful conviction. So, I want to be able to help these people as much as I can cause, again, I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't have the support or the help that I got either. And that's what I want to do is help somebody else." [R12]

[50] Brown, Marilyn & Barbara Bloom. "Reentry and renegotiating motherhood: Maternal identity and success on parole" (2009) 55:2 Crime Delinquency 167.

In giving back to their families and communities, many exonerees have come full circle, finding ways to reciprocate the support they received when their journeys began, furthering their growth and post-exoneration transformations.

V Discussion and Conclusions

Individuals that are resilient can often bounce back after traumatic events because their core beliefs are not challenged by the difficulties they experienced. In contrast, individuals who experience PTG have survived events that challenged their worldviews and fundamental beliefs, triggering a reconsideration and renegotiation of who they are in relation to others and to the world (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; 2004).[51] The exonerees we interviewed attached significant meaning to their traumatic experiences, giving them a new purpose as they move forward in life and allowing them to re-establish their identities as individuals who are making valuable contributions to society. We are not suggesting that wrongful conviction is a positive life event, but that some exonerees are able to experience growth following a terrible injustice.

Although the findings reported here were gathered as part of a broader study on exonerees' post-release experiences and not a study on PTG specifically, we believe that the positive changes described by many of the exonerees reflect the areas of growth assessed by the PTGI. There is evidence to suggest that PTG begins prior to release, with some individuals taking advantage of self-improvement opportunities while incarcerated. Beyond providing a way to cope with idle time, the programs they participated in helped them to look ahead and develop goals for the future. These were often goals which they hadn't previously considered. Some leaned on faith while incarcerated to make sense of their conviction and find purpose in their experience.

Leaning on others for support with both instrumental and emotional needs also seemed to be critical elements of healing and growth. While some of the exonerees struggled to reach out for assistance and open up about their experiences, those who did eventually developed a greater closeness with others, increasing their feelings of trust and safety. Prior research on formerly incarcerated individuals has shown that they are more likely to experience positive and sustained change as they become receptive to offers of support.[52] Becoming more expressive with others strengthens their surrounding support system, leading to more offers of assistance and encouragement. This sustained support then motivates the individual to keep forging ahead, but more importantly, helps the individual to establish a new identity.[53]

To facilitate PTG, the justice system, along with organizations that support exonerees, can help by providing opportunities for self-improvement both behind bars and after release.

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[51] Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996), *supra* note 16; Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004), *supra* note 19.

[52] Giordano, Peggy C, Stephen A Cernkovich & Jennifer L Rudolph. "Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation" (2002) 107:4 Am J Sociol 859; Panuccio, Elizabeth A et al. "Social support, motivation, and the process of juvenile reentry: An exploratory analysis of desistance" (2012) 51:3 J Offender Rehabil 115.

[53] Chouhy, Cecilia, Francis T Cullen & Heejin Lee. (2020). "A social support theory of desistance" (2020) 6:2 J Dev Life-Course Cr 153; Giordano et al, *supra* note 45.

Furthermore, for some exonerees after a wrongful conviction it seems crucial to connect with other exonerees and bond over shared experiences, in order to build a sense of community and strengthen existing support systems.

Interestingly, our findings suggested that PTG might have different qualities for male and female exonerees. Notably, some of the male respondents indicated feeling calmer and more patient, while some female respondents described becoming tougher and more vocal in advocating for themselves and for others. For both the men and the women, these changes were framed in a positive light. Potentially, in the process of forming new identities, the gender stereotypes they had previously internalized were challenged. It is not possible to generalize these findings to the population of exonerees given the small sample size of this study, but this is an area worth exploring in future research.

Our study was retrospective; a significant amount of time passed since release for most participants. This fact limits our ability to fully explicate the process through which post-traumatic growth occurs. Longitudinal studies would allow closer examination of growth over time, and whether observable positive changes occur for respondents who describe post-traumatic growth. Future studies should also empirically test the relationship between post-traumatic growth and post-release success to identify specific factors that might predict PTG. This knowledge could help inform the efforts to support exonerees as they rebuild their lives after release from prison.

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