Improving the conceptualisation, measurement, and prediction of stress-related growth

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

Anthony Lamotte
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Abstract

It is well known that stressful experiences can lead to negative processes and outcomes. However, a large and growing body of literature has established that stressful experiences can also result in a suite of positive consequences. One such positive post-stressor consequence is stress-related growth (SRG; also known as posttraumatic growth). While the SRG literature has provided a balance to an overly negative focus on post-stressor processes and outcomes, this thesis argues that much of the research is limited by unsupported and pessimistic assumptions regarding the necessity for trauma, a shattered assumptive world (i.e. worldview), and intellectual and emotional struggle in order for SRG to develop. This thesis aims to refute these assumptions and to propose an alternate definition and model of SRG that are unbridled by them. In doing so, this thesis aims to improve the conceptualisation, measurement, and prediction of stress-related growth. This is achieved through the use of a mixed methods approach over the course of three studies.

The first study is an exploratory, qualitative study of the positive and negative subjective experience of parents of children who have been diagnosed with a mental disorder. These parents were chosen as they are an under-researched population with unique characteristics that make them well-suited for construct development and hypothesis generation. An interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed a SRG domain that had not previously been identified in the literature: goal-directed action. This finding was quantitatively replicated in the second study, which utilised a sample of psychology undergraduates. Additionally, the second study developed and assessed a modified version of the most commonly used measure of SRG, the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). The modified PTGI (MPTGI) was found to have good
reliability and greater convergent and incremental validity than the PTGI, even after controlling for potential confounds. Additionally, the MPTGI was more strongly correlated with participants’ conceptualisations of SRG than was the PTGI. These findings were extended in a quantitative, longitudinal study utilising an international, general population sample. This third study also proposed a novel predictor of SRG: positive beliefs about stressful events. A measure of these beliefs was developed and was found to predict SRG over and above commonly accepted SRG predictors (optimism, positive reinterpretation coping, religiosity, religious coping, deliberate rumination, social support, and social support satisfaction). Taken as a whole, these findings challenge some of the assumptions on which much SRG research is based, and provide empirical support to the novel conceptualisation of SRG proposed in this thesis.