I CAN'T IMAGINE DOING ANYTHING ELSE: THE ROLE OF GENERATIVITY AND POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN THE CAREER DECISIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

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The process of coping with significant adversity often requires substantial effort and takes many different forms. One unique way of responding to adversity (i.e., *generativity*; Erikson,1963) involves turning ones' own recovery outward and helping others who have experienced similar trauma. Drawing from this theoretical framework and utilizing a mixed methods approach, the present study interviewed employees of prosocial organizations (n = 12) and considered how they chose to dedicate their careers to helping others and approached their career duties, identifying past adverse experiences as a significant influence. Quantitative results (n = 100) suggested significant relationships between the integration of traumatic experiences into one's identity and posttraumatic growth (PTG), generativity and PTG, and generativity and experience with significant adverse experiences which impact core beliefs. Given these findings, prosocial organizations serve as a salient context for continued research of the influence of PTG and generativity on organizational communication.

Introduction

When someone experiences significant adversity, substantial effort is required to cope with and adjust to the changes that often occur as a result. This process can manifest in countless ways, some of which are healthier and more functional than others. Specifically, posttraumatic growth (PTG) describes the general process of positive personal development after experience with significantly adverse life events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; 2004). A particularly fascinating form of growth in the wake of adversity (i.e., *generativity*; Erikson, 1963) involves turning ones' own recovery outward and choosing to help others who have experienced similar adversity.

Consider, for example, the employees of victim advocacy organizations, domestic violence shelters, child and family services, and other pro-social organizations who opted for these lines of work because of the connection and similarity between their work and their own difficult experiences. These employees made the choice to encounter adverse circumstances similar to what they had previously experienced on a near-daily basis, and there was likely a multitude of reasons for this vocational decision. One potential reason, and the impetus for this proposed research study, lies in the connection between PTG and generativity as outlined below.

Understanding the proposed connection between PTG and generativity must originate with an exploration of how the coping process begins. Initially, adverse experiences that present a significant disruption to a person's life have a unique potential to facilitate personal growth, largely through the reappraisal and reconstruction of their worldview post-adversity. These experiences promote "life wisdom," allowing people to more clearly see how they fit into the world around them (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). An integral component to this shift in

perspective is the increased importance placed on fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships and the desire to help others, known as generativity (Erikson, 1963).

When taken broadly, *generativity* describes "concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1963, p. 267). Through generative behaviors that focus on "creating, maintaining, offering" or producing benefit for others "as an extension of the self" (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992, p. 1006), people extend the influence of their own life experiences to others, in hopes of ensuring a brighter future for future generations with whom they feel some bond or connection. The original conceptualization of generativity typically refers to the notion of familial generations through the process of having and raising children that will go out into society and continue promoting the life lessons their parents passed on to them. However, in the context of the present study, a generation is conceptualized as a collection of people, regardless of age, who have experienced similar adversity.

People who have coped with similar adversity may feel an inherent connection to one another. Perhaps as a result, they may be uniquely motivated—and, indeed, uniquely qualified—to aid in their own posttraumatic growth through generative actions toward others. There are a number of opportunities for people to express generative actions, including through volunteering, mentoring, and teaching. Although these possibilities are varied, one common thread among them is that they all have the potential to be associated with an organization or occupation.

Indeed, one's occupation serves as a prominent means of expression and development for their self-identity (Christiansen, 1999), and career choices have the potential to provide them with a means of engaging in organized, consistent, and structured generativity. Furthermore, one's career has the potential to promote PTG in its ability to provide an outlet for the expression of generativity and continual sensemaking of past experiences, particularly for people whose

careers with pro-social organizations provide resources for populations they relate to, through their own traumatic experiences or the traumatic experiences of important others in their lives. When paired with the heightened sense of connectedness they feel as a result of their experiences, this process of finding meaning through provide a unique benefit to those they serve contributes to their facilitation of PTG (Groleau et al., 2013). Though similar personal experience is certainly not a requirement for someone to be effective in their efforts to help others, drawing from personal experience allows their approach to helping others to be informed by the sensitivity and nuance of someone who knows what it feels like to need help themselves (Davies, Todahl, & Reichard, 2015).

Furthermore, PTG and generativity are not widely discussed within the field of career or organizational communication; thus, this study focuses on the workplace as a context for examining PTG and generativity from a communicative perspective. Understanding how PTG and generativity influence employees' communication about their career decisions not only provides greater insight to some potential motivators behind important decisions in their lives, it also reinforces the magnitude of career choices (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005), allows for a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of vocational identity and self-identity (Christiansen, 1999), and highlights the opportunity presented to employees of prosocial organizations to integrate their adverse experience into nearly every facet of their self-identity (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Witney & Bates, 2016). Additionally, understanding the connection of PTG to a person's sense of moral obligation to serve others through their career can direct research toward practical applications of effective facilitation of PTG for those seeking guidance in the aftermath of a traumatic experience.

Theoretical Perspective

Aftermath of Trauma

When examining an individual's response to difficult experiences, it is important to begin by considering adversity as existing on a continuum, ranging from small disruptions to life-altering trauma. Within this context, the discursive difference between trauma and adversity rests mainly in the appraisal of the event itself, both in their past and present, relative to their own experiences. The subjective perception of a difficult experience as either trauma or adversity can be understood partially through the event's degree of disruption in someone's life. As Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) explain through their earthquake metaphor, the "seismic impact" of the event determines how significantly a person's world view is "[shaken] up or [shattered]" (p. 10). For an event to be specifically defined as traumatic from a clinical standpoint, a significant degree of disruption must occur. However, the semantic distinction of trauma versus adversity is not what determines one's perception of their adverse experience, nor is it is ultimately the most salient point when considering the influence of their past experiences on their sense of identity, generativity, and vocational goals. Whether or not they use clinical terminology to refer to their experiences is ultimately irrelevant for the context of this research, provided that the event still results in a significant "seismic impact," or perception of how disruptive an event was for someone. Therefore, trauma will be considered as a part of the overall concept of adversity, and the more inclusive term adversity will be used throughout the present research in an effort to reflect the varying degrees of difficulty unique to each individual's experience.

Posttraumatic Coping and Resilience

The potential outcomes of adverse and traumatic experiences are well-research and yet poorly understood. Despite decades of examining the contributing factors that determine a

person's response to trauma and their subjective experience with either posttraumatic distress or growth, particularly among psychology literature, (Chang et al., 2005; Shand et al., 2018; Levi-Belz, Krysinska, & Andriessen, 2020; Zalta et al., 2020) it is still difficult to predict or even account for the wide variations in how people respond to adversity. One factor that offers insight into the coping process is the nature of communication that surrounds it. For example, a person's experiences with adversity and coping are known to impact communicative phenomena, ranging from the ways couples navigate miscarriages through use of metaphors (Horstman et al., 2020), how families manage financial hardship (Afifi et al., 2015), military deployment (Maguire & Sahlstein, 2009), and providing care for elderly family members (Alpert & Womble, 2015). As an extension of this line of research, this study considers how employees of prosocial organizations discuss the connection between their career choices and the coping process and how generativity influences their posttraumatic growth (or lack thereof).

Interestingly, posttraumatic growth and distress processes can (and often do) exist alongside each other (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), one way of explaining the distinction between them can be tied back to broader coping and resilience research which examines responses to adversity in general. Richardson (2002) highlights the role of adversity to serve as a starting point for personal growth and resilience through the process of "resilient reintegration" (p. 311), defined as the finding of some insight as a result of an adverse experience. This process follows a similar trajectory as Calhoun and Tedeschi's (1999) conceptualization of PTG as a way for people to transform trauma into a beneficially life changing experience. For both processes, someone does not "return to baseline" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), but instead integrates the lessons learned from the adverse experience into a new and better normal. However, the degree of profound change is greater for instances of PTG than resilient reintegration, as the traumatic

event itself is subjectively perceived as more significantly life altering than instances for which resilient reintegration occurs (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Stated plainly, more disruptive life experiences offer more opportunities for posttraumatic growth than less disruptive events (which often lead to resilient reintegration).

Due to the similarity between them, the conceptual distinction between PTG and resilient reintegration is tenuous and serves to be a continued focal point for communication research (Carr, 2020). However, examining the connection between these two concepts can also shed some light on the contributing factors which influence one's response to trauma and adversity. Previous research focused on how people cope resiliently with adversity can at least partially inform research regarding PTG, and vice versa. As Carr (2020) explains, resilience and PTG are associated through the "relational component of PTG," which emphasizes how individuals relate to others as a result of their adversity. When resilient people also display posttraumatic growth, they often do so via the way they relate to others (Carr, 2020). This sense of connectedness with those around them after adversity can manifest in numerous ways. However, this study focused centrally on its expression through one's career, allowing for the career to serve as both a consequence and a catalyst of a person's PTG and the ways they interact with the world around them.

Posttraumatic Growth

When considering PTG, it is important to recognize that the traumatic experience itself is generally not viewed as a positive experience but remains a distressing and adverse circumstance, even as growth occurs (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For example, someone might experience posttraumatic growth and distress simultaneously, and the ongoing process of PTG does not serve as a barrier to negative appraisals of the traumatic experience. A response to

trauma is a collection of continual emotional and communicative appraisals of the event itself, and researchers examine this process by focusing on salient facets of a person's experience. In order for a response to a traumatic event to be considered PTG, the traumatic event itself need not be reappraised as beneficial. Rather, the consequences of experiencing such significant hardship must ultimately be defined by a positive transformational quality for someone's view of themselves, their relationships, and their perception of the world around them (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

In studying posttraumatic growth, researchers measure an individual's ongoing experience with recovering from trauma in relation to a spectrum of factors which indicate their affective response to the trauma and the transformational properties associated with them. A primary method of holistically examining the entire context of this nuanced experience is to utilize the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), which offers more context to the presence or absence of posttraumatic growth and serves as a useful roadmap for understanding how the perceptions of self and others have shifted and/or solidified as a result of a traumatic experience. However, existing research tends to focus more on the nuances of the posttraumatic experience itself rather than the contextual factors with the potential to influence the magnitude of posttraumatic growth or distress. To gain deeper insight into these contextual factors, we consider how the centrality of the traumatic event might alter the trajectory one's posttraumatic growth (Groleau et al., 2013).

Centrality of Trauma

The connection between one's experience of trauma and their response to it is highly individualized, thus making theoretical assertions about the motivation for posttraumatic growth even more challenging. Over the past four decades, researchers have examined a number of

characteristics that attempt to explain why people respond to trauma the way they do. For example, a person's level of optimism (Matlin & Stang, 1979), extraversion (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), efficacy (Skodol, 2010), and problem-solving ability (Southwick, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2005) all impact the response to trauma in varying degrees. What remains unclear, however, is why people with similar characteristics respond differently to adverse experiences. Although there is likely a multitude of reasons that explain these different responses, one noteworthy consideration is how salient or 'central' the trauma is to that person's life.

Groleau et al. (2013) describes the centrality of trauma as "the degree to which an individual believes a negative event has become a core part of their identity" (p. 477). For those who consider the event to be central to their sense of self, the traumatic experience can serve as a turning point in their lives, both for the better or for the worse. Because the event is held in such high importance in relation to a person's core beliefs and life story, it becomes a reference point for their daily experiences.

In some cases, this continual focus on the trauma facilitates *rumination*, or repetitive thinking, which has been identified as a significant predictor of posttraumatic outcomes (Carr, 2019; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). However, it is important to delineate between the two types of rumination associated with posttraumatic outcomes. Groleau and colleagues (2013) identifies the influence of both deliberate and intrusive rumination on the experience of either posttraumatic growth or distress, relating each outcome to the cognitive processes associated with making sense of the event. In instances of deliberate rumination, a concerted effort is made to find meaning in the traumatic experience. This purposeful search for meaning results in an increased likelihood of perceiving some sense of reason for the event's occurrence, and, in turn, provides a foundation for reconstructing the shattered world view that remains after the event, and is thus

associated with a greater chance of growth (Park et al., 2008). In contrast, intrusive rumination refers to the undesired consideration of the traumatic event while consciously attempting to avoid thinking about it at all (Groleau et al., 2013). Considering the involuntary and unwanted nature of this form of rumination, meaning is not derived as clearly, and the jarring reminder of the traumatic event serves as a likely facilitator of posttraumatic distress.

Thus, one factor that may play a significant role in understanding which form of rumination may be present (and, consequently, whether a person experiences posttraumatic growth or distress), is the centrality of the traumatic event. Interestingly, when people integrate their adverse experience with their larger identity through their career decisions and frame it as a symbol of important themes in their lives, it may be easier to identity opportunities for PTG. This link has been suggested and supported in previous research, most notably the study Boals and Schuettler (2011) conducted, which found centrality of events to be a significant predictor of PTG, even after controlling for deliberate rumination and the net change in a person's core beliefs.

In the present study, considering one's career as a context for examining PTG and centrality provides benefits to existing research within both organizational communication and coping and resilience scholarship. By relating the connection of PTG and centrality of event to vocational decisions, the present study creates a foundation for future research on the intersection of career and self-identities within the choices people make regarding their careers as well as how they enact certain behaviors through their professional work. This is especially relevant for careers reliant on employees continually interacting with other people's adversity through their work and serves as a potential rationale for why someone would choose a career that exposes them to high levels of emotional fatigue, burnout, or secondary trauma (McCann and Pearlman,

1990). Furthermore, delving deeper into the connection of centrality and PTG through the context of career decisions allows for future consideration of the multitude of ways people cope with adversity throughout their lives, and provides another perspective on what PTG can actually look like in practice.

H1: For employees of pro-social organizations, the integration of traumatic experiences into one's identity (i.e., centrality of the event) is positively associated with posttraumatic growth.

Identity, Generativity, and Posttraumatic Growth

One reason why integrating traumatic experiences into one's identity is likely to foster PTG is because it offers an opportunity for people to take positive, prosocial action related to their adverse experience. This becomes particularly salient for those who use their careers as an outlet for this prosocial action, as they create more opportunities to find meaning in their own adversity by considering them within both their professional and personal lives. Through generative behaviors, people extend the influence of their own life experiences to others, in hopes of ensuring the success of future generations.

Initially, the concept of generativity was proposed within Erikson's (1950; 1959) stages of psychosocial development, which provide a psychological explanation for individual behavior and personality development through one's lifetime. He suggests eight stages of development, where a person navigates two opposing tensions, all of which are associated with unique sets of behavioral characteristics and the "[acquisition of associated virtues]" (Carr, 2020). Germane to this study is the seventh stage that emerges midlife, in which Erikson suggests the crisis of *generativity versus stagnation*, from which the virtue of concern for others may emerge. Though a rudimentary understanding of generativity frames it as the desire to have children and create a

future society through raising them to uphold the values of their parents, the avenues of generative expression are considerably more nuanced. Generative actions can manifest in numerous ways, including political activism and charitable contributions (Peterson & Duncan, 1999), career achievements (Slater, 2003), volunteerism, relationships, and even hobbies (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), all of which fall into the original conceptualization of generative concern as encompassing "productivity and creativity" (Erikson, 1950, p. 267) as means of guiding society. Two clear case studies of highly generative people showcase the behaviors of Martin Luther King Jr. (Erikson, 1958) and Mahatma Gandhi (Erikson, 1969) as models of generative concern directed at the construction of a better society.

Moreover, generativity is not limited to those navigating the tensions of midlife but might also occur in the context of different generations, including others who have experienced similar forms of adversity, regardless of age. For example, generativity may manifest as providing guidance or mentorship for people who have experienced similar adversity. In this context, one person is still nurturing of another and still exhibits concern for a different generation of individuals with adverse experiences. However, this expression of generativity is not limited by age, but rather the experience of shared adversity and investment in the well-being of others (Carr, 2020).

The application of generativity is not solely limited to the theoretical and methodological frameworks available within the discipline in which it originated. Within communication research (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), generativity is considered alongside the social, cultural, and personal factors which influence the expression of generative concern. The degree of generativity present in one's life can be observed through a variety of prosocial behaviors, outlined in the self-report-based Loyola-Generativity Scale (LGS, McAdams & de St. Aubin,

1992) which allows for their generative concern and behaviors to be considered within the context of the sociocultural structures they are situated in. This not only expands the conceptualization of when and why people are driven to help others, it also allows for a more holistic consideration of how generative concern is communicated through thoughts and actions. Furthermore, the facets of generativity are considered within the context of identity construction. Examining a person's generativity alongside their sense of self allows for their desire to guide others to be considered both within the context of the experiences that informed it and as part of the life narrative people create to make sense of their place within the world around them (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Stated plainly, generativity is able to both influence and be influenced by the experiences that define one's self-identity. This contextualization of generativity then potentially allows for other central identity constructs to be considered as reflexively influential for one another, particularly as identity constructs relate to the integration of adverse experiences into a person's "identity narrative" (Witney & Bates, 2016, p. 90). For example, the sense of generativity experienced after facing adversity can be considered as a potential influence on the meaning attributed to the adversity, and vice versa. Especially when an event is considered to be highly central and the cognitive process of sensemaking has begun to attribute meaning to adversity, narrative construction allows for individuals to integrate life altering events into their sense of self, aiding in the redefining of their world view after the truths they once held have been shaken (Groleau et al., 2013).

The process of integrating meaningful experiences and notions of self-identity into a cohesive life narrative can greatly benefit one's sense of self, self-esteem, and overall satisfaction with life (Witney & Bates, 2016). Furthermore, the measured consideration a person applies to the construction of their life narrative can be examined through the same deliberate rumination

Groleau et al. (2013) mentioned, as well as the potential for greater PTG which follows. Through the process of confronting the adverse experience and its impact on one's core beliefs, the reconstruction of one's sense of self and their place in the world is guided by the overarching notion that their hardship served a purpose, and that their adversity fits into a more purposeful life narrative than they realized prior to experiencing it. In this way, their core beliefs are not destroyed, but are revealed to be different than they initially considered. Without this deliberate, concerted focus on creating meaning from an adverse experience, a person may be left with their core beliefs challenged but not reframed.

Moreover, in the aforementioned experience of identity construction and PTG, individuals are likely to integrate generative concern into their identity narrative and redefined world view, as PTG facilitates a similar sense of connection and social responsibility to others (Carr, 2020). Considering this conceptual overlap between PTG and generative concern, it follows that a reflexive relationship exists between positive posttraumatic outcomes and the desire to improve the lives of others. The application of McAdams's and de St. Aubin's (1992) conceptualization of generativity provides richer context to PTG research, as identified in the significant relationship between degrees of generativity and the tendency to relate to others in their PTG (Carr, 2020). However, the relationship between PTG and generativity remains a relatively novel focal point for continued academic research. Though a person whose generative concern is rooted in their core beliefs may not be any more likely to experience significant trauma or adversity, they may be likelier to establish a connection between the meaning they attribute to their adverse experiences and the heightened sense of interconnectedness brought about by their PTG as they reconstruct their existing world view to integrate their adverse experiences (Cann et al., 2010). In doing so, behaviors which benefit others serve as a

manifestation of the growth experienced after facing significant adversity, and their existing generative concern may be reaffirmed or amplified, due to the centrality and degree of disruption of core beliefs the event presents (Groleau et al., 2013). Their existing sense of social responsibility to future generations, paired with the altered worldview associated with their traumatic experience, has the potential to facilitate greater PTG.

H2: Prosocial organization employees' generativity is positively associated with their posttraumatic growth.

People with significant generative concern prior to an adverse event may recognize an augmented degree of connectivity with the world around them in the PTG process. However, for others an adverse experience may serve as a facilitator for PTG and, in turn, as a catalyst for a newfound sense of generative concern. Through their experience of adversity, those with comparably low generativity who experience PTG may integrate a heightened concern for others as they reconstruct their self-identity to reflect the refocusing of priorities which the adversity creates. Particularly if their adverse experience becomes a crucial part of their self-identity, their adverse experience has potential to reinforce PTG and the accompanying sense of social responsibility to others, enacted through generative behaviors (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Similarly, the integration of adverse experiences into a person's self-identity and core beliefs, and desire to help others may become a contributing factor for one's career insight and career identity, both of which have a strong influence on the development of career goals and vocational decisions, which London (1993) conceptualized as career motivation. Therefore, these individuals whose desire for generativity and core beliefs are informed by their past experience with significant adversity may seek out careers or organizational roles which inherently promote

the betterment of others' lives, thus serving to facilitate the expression of multiple facets of their identity.

H3: Significant adverse experiences which impact core beliefs are positively associated with generativity for prosocial organization employees.

Prosocial Organizations as a Context for Growth

A shift of self-identity in response to adversity may manifest in various ways, ranging from detrimental world view shifts to beneficial identity changes which may foster personal growth. Moreover, the existence and expression of generative behaviors may potentially present in novel ways after the adverse experience. One potential mechanism to support the facilitation of these shifts can be observed in a person's vocational choices. Considering the significance of one's occupation on both their emotional and physical health (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005), career choices are not decisions taken lightly. Furthermore, someone can use their occupation as a means of reflecting their self-identity through their work, especially if their chosen career focuses on central tenets of their self-identity. In this way, people can integrate their self-identity into their occupational identity, using their career as an outlet for the holistic expression of their identity (Christiansen, 1999). The facilitation of generative behaviors through one's career has already been proposed as a possibility (Erikson, 1950; Slater, 2003). However, the existing research is limited in the scope of career choices considered and is primarily quantitative in nature, lacking the nuance of the participants' own words to describe the way they consider the intersection of generative behaviors and their career. Thus, the present study suggests that using one's career as a means of serving the community can also serve as a manifestation of PTG or personal growth following adversity. For those who experience a highly central adverse event and weave that experience into their revised self-identity and world view, the ultimate expression

of their experience as meaningful may rest in their ability to help others through into every aspect of their life, both personal and professional. Therefore, organizations which provide social wellbeing for the communities in which they reside may serve as a context for promoting personal growth for those who have experienced significant adversity. Thus, in the aftermath of adversity, an individual's career decisions could be shaped by their desire to promote prosocial behavior in the world around them, especially if they experience high levels of generative concern and are able to utilize the lessons they learned from their own experience to inform the coping and potential growth for another person experiencing similar adverse circumstances.

If a person experiences high levels of identification with their occupation, it would best serve them to pursue professional goals which do not present a threat to their existing self-identity, especially considering the significant influence career commitment (Blau, 1985), involvement (Hoole & Boshoff, 1998), and identification (Christiansen, 1999) have on their overall wellbeing and feelings of satisfaction. In turn, levels of career satisfaction reflexively influence the levels of generativity someone feels, which can result in their experiencing greater generativity and deriving more personal satisfaction from their career (Millova & Blatny, 2018). This alignment of personal identity needs being met through vocational roles also presents benefits to the organizations themselves. Those who report high levels of identification with their organizational role exhibit lower degrees of intent to leave their position at the organization (Scott et al., 1999). Similarly, those who feel as if their career allows them the opportunity to express their identity express greater levels of commitment to the organization which employs them (Blau, 1985). Additionally, employees who experience high generative concern and are able to meet those needs through their organizational role tend to enhance the organizational culture through their dedication to diligently working to fulfill the goals of the organization,

particularly when those goals align with the core beliefs they hold regarding what work is important (Schott, 1992). Finally, those in need of guidance for their own experiences with adversity benefit from prosocial organizations being comprised of highly involved employees who are able to inform their organizational duties through the context of their personal experiences with adversity, especially if the type of adversity they experience is related to the type of adversity the organization targets with its services. For example, sexual assault survivors are more likely to feel comfortable discussing their posttraumatic experiences with a clinician who understands what it feels like to be a sexual assault survivor and navigate the process of recovery from experience. Even for clinicians or social workers who don't have direct experience with that type of adversity, utilizing resources created by a clinician or social worker who does have that experience allows for a greater level of sensitivity to the nuanced challenges their client is experiencing (Davies, Todahl, & Reichard, 2015). Therefore, considering the numerous benefits provided to the prosocial organizations, their employees, and the populations they serve, the present study seeks to examine prosocial organizations as a context for growth among people who experience adversity.

RQ1: How do adverse life experiences inform the career decisions of employees in pro-social organizations?

RQ2: How, if at all, do employees of pro-social organizations integrate their adverse experiences, identities, and careers?

When taken collectively, there are three primary goals in the present study: First, to suggest that one's vocation can serve as a context for examining PTG and generativity, and to examine how the one's vocational decisions may be informed by their adverse experiences; Second to examine the influence of PTG on an individual's generativity; and finally, to consider the influence that

degree of centrality and integration of experience into identity has on an a person's expression of PTG.

Method

Mixed Methods Study Design

This study employed a mixed methods research approach by integrating quantitative data from an online survey of employees of prosocial organizations with follow-up interviews of those employees whose previous adverse experiences were influential in their career decision. Doing so allowed for the results to create a more nuanced, holistic picture of how PTG and generativity fit into the careers of those employed by prosocial organizations. The quantitative data permitted initial correlational analyses of the relationships among variables such as the centrality of event, generativity, PTG, and core beliefs, whereas the addition of qualitative interview data allowed for a more specific consideration of what PTG and generativity actually look like within the participants careers, as well as how their past experiences with adversity inform the ways they enact their organizational duties.

Participants

Participants for the quantitative portion of this study included 100 employees of various pro-social organizations in the United States ranging from 20 to 71 years old (M = 36.76, SD = 11.36) who worked at the organization for an average of 4.54 years (SD = 4.62). More than half of the participants identified as female (78%, n = 78) and White (74%, n = 74), although 6% identified as Black/African American, 5% identified as Latinx/Hispanic American, 3% identified with multiple ethnicities, 2% were Native American and 2% identified as Asian/Asian American. Just under half of the participants were married (48%, n = 48), although 36 % reported that they

were single and had never been married, while 6% reported that they were divorced or separated and 2% were widowed.

When asked about the type of pro-social organization they worked for, 28% reported that they provided services for children, families, or schools (n = 28), 13% worked in advocacy and community organizations (n = 13), 9% worked for organizations focused on psychiatric and/or developmental disabilities (n = 9), 7% worked in healthcare (n = 7), 5% worked in hospice or palliative care (n = 5), 3% worked in substance abuse (n= 3) and 1% worked in justice and corrections (n = 1). The remaining 20% (n = 20) of participants reported that they worked in a variety of other organizations including providing support to sex trafficking survivors, victims of domestic violence, workforce development, and Indian healthcare.

Procedures

Following human subjects' approval, approximately 100 participants for the online survey, and 12 participants for the interview portion were recruited through the researchers' personal contacts and through one of the researcher's personal social media accounts, namely Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. Recruitment then continued through snowball sampling from the personal contacts of the researcher. The researchers also sent recruitment emails and/or phone calls to various prosocial organizations to offer an opportunity for their employees to participate. Potential participants were given access to the researcher's contact information and a link to the online survey.

Survey participants were age 18 or older and employed by a prosocial organization. For the purposes of this study, prosocial organizations were defined as any public-benefit organization, both non-profit and for profit, "which exists primarily to serve others, to provide goods or services (including information or advocacy) to those in need, or to contribute to the

general welfare" (Salamon, 1995, p. 54). Examples of prosocial organizations include, but are not limited to, United Way, The Net, Salvation Army, CASA, etc. Survey participants who had experienced difficult life events, either directly through personal experience or indirectly via the experiences of close friends and family, were eligible to participate in follow-up interviews with the researcher. If eligible, participants were given an option at the end of the survey to provide contact information to the researcher to be contacted for a follow-up interview via Zoom or phone. Some participants were directly recruited for interviews and received the consent form via email after the interview was scheduled. All interview participants confirmed their completion of the online survey either before or after their interview was conducted.

Before beginning the survey, participants provided their electronic consent to participate by selecting "I agree" after reviewing the consent form through Qualtrics. Participants who did not indicate their electronic consent were not able to continue with the online survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the survey could be terminated by the participant at any time. Online survey data was collected anonymously, and no identifying characteristics were associated with survey responses. Participation in the online survey took an average of 41 minutes and assessed participants' generativity, vocational identity, and posttraumatic growth (for those who reported that they previously experienced adversity related to their career choice), as well as basic demographic information (see Appendix A).

After completing the online survey, participants had the option but not the obligation to enter their email address to be contacted to participate in a follow up interview with the researcher, either via phone or video chat (e.g., Skype, Facetime, Zoom). If participants opted to continue the study via follow-up interview, they were directed to a separate consent form (including consent for audio recording). Participants were then asked to provide their electronic

consent via Qualtrics to the interview portion of this study, as well as consent to the audio recording of their interview. Again, participants indicated their consent by selecting "I agree" after reviewing the forms in Qualtrics. Interviews took an average of 46 minutes. Sample interview questions are included in Appendix B. Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent for later transcription. Following the interview, the researcher uploaded the interview data and transcribed the interviews. The researcher engaged in members checks, contacting interviewees after interviews were completed, to ensure accurate representation of data. If eligible participants opted to participate in a follow up interview, they were entered into a drawing for a chance to win a $25 Amazon gift card provided by the researcher.

Survey Measures

Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) The Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS) includes 20 items which measures a person's perceptions of their level of generativity and concern for others. Examples of items on the LGS include "Others would say that I have made unique contributions to society," and "I think that I will be remembered for a long time after I die." Each item is ranked on a scale of 0 ("The statement never applies to you") to 3 ("The statement applies to you very often or nearly always"). McAdams & de St. Aubin (1992) reported high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of .83 and test-retest reliability of .73. All study participants completed this measure, and alpha reliability for this scale in the current study was .75.

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996) Participants who reported that they previously experienced adversity or trauma that impacted their career decisions completed the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). Participants were asked to reflect on the difficult experience that impacted their career choice as they responded. The PTGI

includes 21 items which measure the degree of positive influence experienced as a result of a traumatic experience. Items pertain to five dimensions of PTG; relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life and were averaged to create a global PTG score for the purpose of this study. Examples of items on the PTGI include "I have a greater sense of closeness with others," and "New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise." Participants rank each item on a scale of 0 ("I did not experience this change") to 5 ("I experienced this change to a very great degree"). Though the measures are reliant on self-report data, the PTGI has shown strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of .90 and test-retest reliability of .71 and has been utilized in PTG research across a breadth of contexts (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996). In the current study, alpha reliability for the PTGI was .92.

Core Beliefs Inventory (Cann et al., 2010) The Core Beliefs Inventory (CBI) includes 9 items which measure the degree of disruption to a person's world view as a result of adversity. In the present study, participants were asked to reflect on the difficult experience that impacted their career choice as they responded. This includes their perceptions of self-identity, others, and the world around them. Examples of items on the CBI include "Because of this experience, I seriously examined my relationships with other people," and "Because of this experience I seriously examined my beliefs about the meaning of my life." Each item is ranked on a scale of 0 ("Not at all") to 5 ("To a Very Great Degree"). Cann et al. (2010) reported good scores of internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha of .82, as well as test-retest reliability of .69. Continued use of this scale in research supports this claim (Cronbach's alpha = .93; Groleau et al., 2013). In this study, alpha reliability was recorded as .80.

Centrality of Event Scale (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006) The Centrality of Events Scale (CES) includes 20 items which examine how significant an adverse event is in relation to one's

self-identity and narrative identity. In the present study, participants were asked to reflect on the difficult experience that impacted their career choice as they responded. Examples include "If this event had not happened to me, I would be a different person today" and "This event has become a reference point for the way I understand new experiences." Each item is ranked on a scale of 1 ("totally disagree") to 5 ("totally agree"). Berntsen & Rubin (2006) reported high alpha reliability of .94, and additional studies which utilize this scale report high reliability as well (Cronbach's alpha = .89; Groleau et al., 2013). The current study also reported excellent alpha reliability at .96.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Prior to conducting the analyses required for hypothesis testing, survey items were reverse coded as necessary such that higher values indicated an increased presence of that variable. Items within each measure were averaged together for data analysis, and alpha reliabilities were evaluated. Descriptive statistics were compiled prior to imputing missing data using multiple imputation in SPSS. Hypothesis testing was conducted using Pearson's product-moment correlations in SPSS (See Table 1).

Qualitative Interview participants were assigned a pseudonym and highlight color for color coding, and qualitative data was transcribed and then analyzed in three rounds of coding using an open and axial coding scheme to allow for themes to emerge from interview data (Tracy, 2013). In the first round of coding, transcripts were reviewed and participant responses to the interview questions were highlighted and color coded to correspond to the question that was asked (for example, responses regarding the best aspects of the participant's job will be highlighted in pink to visually indicate the response is to that specific question). This initial round of coding involved reviewing the interview transcripts to discern general impressions of

the participants responses and creating a list of those impressions for closer review during subsequent codings. During the second round of coding, the highlighted responses were analyzed for more detail and a summary or partial quote of the response was noted in the codebook under the corresponding category. Each summary or quote was highlighted in the participant's assigned color to indicate which quotes came from which participant and the citation were reflected accordingly. Through this second round of coding, the initial list of impressions was collapsed into a narrower list of concepts based on frequency of that concept in participants' responses and relevance to the research questions. During the third round of coding the responses added to the codebook in the second round of coding were analyzed more closely and emergent themes previously identified were specified further, with the final list of themes reflecting the most salient or most frequent themes present in the interview data. These specific themes were then categorized alongside the participants responses and the direct quotes utilized in the results and discussion, and an outline of the qualitative results was constructed.

Findings

Quantitative Results

In general, the bivariate correlations reported in Table 1 offered support for H1, H2, and H3. Specifically, H1 predicted that the integration of trauma into one's identity (operationalized as the centrality of traumatic events) would be positively associated with posttraumatic growth. Indeed, results indicated that employees of prosocial organizations who reported their traumatic experience as being central to their career identity also reflected more posttraumatic growth than

those who reported the trauma as being less central to their career identity ($r = .61$, $p < .001$). Thus, H1 was supported.

Similarly, H2 predicted that generativity would also be positively associated with posttraumatic growth in prosocial organization employees, such that more generative individuals displayed more posttraumatic growth than less generative individuals. The bivariate correlation suggested a trend toward the hypothesized pattern of association, $r = .29$, $p = .05$. Given the small effect size relative to the modest size of this sample, it is likely this pattern would emerge as statistically significant in a larger sample.

The third hypothesis posited in this study suggested that employees working for prosocial organizations experienced more generativity when their career choice led them to examine their core beliefs. Indeed, the most generative people also reported that they thoroughly examined their core beliefs as a result of adversity ($r = .46$, $p < .05$). Thus, H3 was also supported.

Qualitative Results

Adverse Experiences Influence Career Decisions

The first research question focused on the ways employees of prosocial organizations made the decision to pursue their careers, and the relationship between that decision and their past experiences with adversity. In response to the first research question, the overarching theme was that the accumulation of past adverse experiences coupled with existing identity traits were the catalyst for starting careers in prosocial organizations. Though some participants indicated their career decisions were already focused toward prosocial work prior to the experience of adversity, their experiences served to heighten an already existing desire to help others. This connection is further explored through the subthemes identified, as well as examples of the relationship between adverse experiences and prosocial career decisions.

Career Decisions as a Result of Adverse Experiences

When describing how they came to work at a prosocial organization, participants related their choices through the lens of their past experiences, specifically with adversity. Many participants identified their connection to the organizations they worked for through the need for that organization themselves during times of hardship. Specifically, this connected to those who (1) were actually able to receive the support they needed and (2) those who were unaware of resources that would have been significantly beneficial to them at the time.

"I received so much love, now it's my turn to give it to others" (Participant 1). This sentiment was echoed repeatedly as participants described the outpouring of support they received during times of hardship. From their own experiences, they had an intimate knowledge of how "invaluable" (Participant 12) that support was for their ability to cope, move forward, and eventually grow in the face of adversity. After experiencing the support they needed, it was a "natural [next] step" to help those who were experiencing similar hardship (Participant 2). Furthermore, to have received the benefit of generosity from others and to not "pay it forward" (Participant 1) was viewed by some as a selfish, even hypocritical act. As Participant 6 stated:

> "[The support I received in hard times made me want to do whatever I could to give that back to my community and] take it a step further. I'm a firm believer of practicing what you preach, and to speak highly [of the people who helped me] and then turn around and not reciprocate to the next person makes me no better than a hypocrite."

Participants who experienced guidance and support from others in response to their adversity expressed how transformational it was for someone to reach out in times of need and offer a helping hand. Specifically, Participant 6, a former EMT, described the gratitude he has for the people who helped him, highlighting that he "wouldn't be where [he] is today" without the kindness of those who spent their "time and effort" to help his family following the loss of their home to a wildfire. In fact, with regard to his own adverse experiences he tends to remember less

about the actual adversity and more about how meaningful it was for his family to receive an outpouring of support in their time of need. Moreover, the value of this type of support from others served as a driving factor for participants when considering career options. For example, Participant 1 identifies her choice to serve her community through employment at her church as the result "of all the people that were in my life after my mom died and how much they helped me, I wanted to give back what I had received in whatever form it took…it's like a pay it forward thing." Following their experience of support with a career that provides that same support to others allows them an outlet to tangibly express gratitude for the help they received.

Providing to Others What I Didn't Receive. Not all participants had experienced the positive influence of support and resources during their times of hardship, and this absence of support served to be an equally important catalyst for dedicating a career to helping others. An unhelpful or ineffective response from friends, family, and healthcare providers to suffering with disordered eating (Participant 8), anxiety and depression (Participant 10), or grief from the loss of a loved one (Participant 9) all contributed to the desire to create the types of beneficial support someone needs when experiencing such adversity. This concern with creating a space for positive responses to adversity serves as a generative approach to expressing their helper identity, as they provide the resources they would have benefitted from during their own experiences, as Participant 11 highlighted when explaining why she specifically relates to the women and children in danger of homelessness whom her organization serves. In helping others the way they needed to be helped, participants expressed an appreciation for the ability to make adverse experiences less detrimental for others than they were personally. Furthermore, Participants 5 and 7 explained how implementing effective, beneficial sources of support for their clients serves as a way to pass on those sources to the next generation as people continue on to share their experiences with others

in need. By doing so, participants were able to find meaning in the work they do, knowing they made a difference in someone else's life.

Strengthened Desire to Help Others

For many participants, dedicating their career to helping others provided a way to combine the appreciation they have for support they received with an innate desire to help others. Several participants described themselves as "helpers," explaining that they've felt an internal sense of determination to make the world a better place and extend kindness and generosity to those around them (Participants 11, 9, 6, 4, 2, and 1). In directing their occupation toward helping others, participants felt a sense of purpose through the work they do, often expressing gratitude, awe, and appreciation that they "get do to this" and "get paid" to help people (Participant 12).

Moreover, while the drive to help others was already a significant influence on their self-identity as a helper, Participants 1 and 2 both explained that their adverse experiences provided a focus to those they aimed to serve, identifying their choice to specifically help foster families or grieving individuals as a result of the loss of their mother during their formative years. Though they expressed a high probability that they would have ended up helping others in some capacity regardless, their specific experiences directed that desire toward specific populations which they could relate to through their experiences with adversity. Additionally, Participant 8 described how from a young age she was innately interested in working as a counselor, but her personal experience with disordered eating was what focused her career to specifically serve those who struggle with disordered eating. She was able to direct her concern for others onto a specific target after her own experiences seeking help for disordered eating, as her adversity provided a more meaningful focus for her desire to help others.

Barriers to Helping Others

While participants career decisions were largely impacted in a positive way by their experiences of hardship, there was also an underlying theme of their work presenting unique challenges when those they aim to serve experience adversity similar to their own. Burnout and secondary trauma are already prevalent throughout the helping professions (Rotenstein et al., 2018), but participants found this to be especially true for those who have personal experience with the trauma their clients are struggling with. This provides limitations to the help they are able to provide, as well as personal detriment and need for proper self-care practices.

"It's not Your Emergency" (Participant 6). Participants described their repeated exposure to difficult situations through their careers helping others and explained the challenge of emotional involvement with the people they help. Regardless of personal experience with their specific situations, Participant 6 explained the physical and psychological toll his work as an EMT had, even stating that it felt like he was "attending a funeral" every day. However, the weight of bearing constant witness to such hardship seemed particularly prevalent among those who serve others with similar experiences to themselves. Due to their understanding of what that experience is like, participants described how challenging it can be to become emotionally involved without becoming so involved it serves as a source of personal harm. Participant 3 describes her experience as a special education teacher and the disclosure of "horrific abuse" by one of her students. In that instance, she explained how emotionally taxing it was to hear of the traumatic experiences of her student, even citing this experience as the reason for switching from teaching special education to high school chemistry. Though she had an internal desire to help this student and others, the level of emotional involvement that came with teaching special education served as a detriment to her own wellbeing. This experience was common among participants, as they describe the personal guilt they felt when they "failed" those they were trying to help (Participants 12, 9, and 7), as well

as the “psychic toll” Participant 2 felt when leading grief support groups following the loss of a close friend or when providing support for someone whose spouse had died of breast cancer, a disease which she herself had survived.

In order to mitigate the negative personal impact of emotional involvement with others experiencing adversity, participants described a plethora of self-care practices which allow them to continue serving others while “protecting their humanity” (Participant 3). This included seeking professional mental health services (Participants 4, 6, 10, and 11), compartmentalizing work and personal life (Participants 1 and 6) and avoiding “getting too close to home” before personally healing from their own adverse experiences (Participant 11). As participant 10 explained, “[working as a mental health professional] made me realize that I have needs also still left. [You have to make sure] you don't deplete your own energy.”

This prioritization of self-care not only protected participants’ own mental health and general well-being, but also ensured the quality of their work and their ability to help others would not suffer as a result of burnout or secondary trauma. Participant 6 described seeing his coworkers become increasingly “jaded” the longer they worked as EMTs without accessing the support they needed, as well as how the quality of patient care would decrease as a result. This rings true for other prosocial organizations as well, leading to the high turnover rates associated with the helping professions (Rotestein et al., 2018).

Drawing from Past Experience at Work

The second research question focuses primarily on how, if at all, participants utilized their past adverse experiences in helping others through their careers. The manner through which past experience was used varied greatly among participants, the overwhelming consensus was that their prior experience with adversity served as a mechanism to better relate to those they were trying to

help, though the degree of personal disclosure sometimes presented personal challenges when approaching their work. Additionally, the insights gained through their professional careers reflexively influences the way participants saw themselves as well as how they make sense of their past experiences of adversity.

Relating through Shared Experience

Trauma sensitive and trauma informed therapeutic interventions have been considered to be highly effective for quite some time (Davies, Todahl, & Reichard, 2015), so it came as no surprise for all participants to indicate some way their past experience with adversity influences their approach to helping others. This was particularly salient for those who have experiences related to the population they serve through their career. Participant 8 described the importance of self-disclosure for her patients:

> "[I'm able to show my clients] I wasn't above having this experience [with an eating disorder]. I think [my experience with an eating disorder] definitely makes me feel differently about it versus someone who's worked with eating disorders who doesn't have a different relationship with food. I think I'm more humble with it"

Participants identified several key benefits from relating their own experiences with hardship to their patients, including the positive outcomes associated with simple social learning (Bandura, 1977). Allowing those they help to view a possible outcome of healthy coping not only provides hope that life will get easier, but also gives them an example of what the journey toward PTG can like. As Participant 7 explains, it allows for the use of "real life examples" in therapy sessions to solidify psychological principles in tangible ways that patients, especially children, can understand more clearly. In this way, she sees past experiences with adversity serve as a "hidden resource" only accessible to those who understand what it's really like to have that experience. Furthermore, it establishes a level of credibility for her patients who may be more wary of accepting her guidance.

> "The therapists and probation officers have all dealt with these behaviors and these settings personally…we know a little bit about the walk and the talk."

Considering the principles outlined in Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), people tend to feel more comfortable disclosing information to someone who has disclosed to them, especially when they perceive a degree of similarity between themselves and the other person. In this context where the self-disclosure may be perceived as highly personal or result in feelings of vulnerability, highlighting this mutual experience served to create a safe and supportive environment where clinicians or caseworkers provided a support their patients weren't used to receiving (Participant 8). In turn, the safety and comfortability the environment provides encouraged more meaningful engagement with the services being offered. For example, Participant 4 continually strives to provide children with a source of support in her so that "no child should have to feel bad about disclosing [abuse]."

Appropriate Self Disclosure

Though the benefits of a practitioner's self disclosure are numerous, disclosure was not a universal practice within prosocial organizations. There are significant limitations to the benefit gained through relating one's personal experience to that of those they're helping, specifically (1) managing the degree of personal emotional involvement in the process of helping others and (2) respecting the autonomy of clients and patients as the controller of their own coping process.

I Feel Your Pain. Due to the similarity of their personal experiences with the experiences of their clients, the degree of empathy prosocial workers express serves as a challenge, both personally and professionally. Participant 10 explained that though her past experience makes it easier for her to relate to her clients it also causes more emotional stress, especially when related to areas of her own adverse experiences which still require more "healing." Fully involving themselves into their client's experience may be a source of secondary trauma, resulting in the

professional feeling more emotionally taxed through the work they do. This was particularly difficult during instances in which participants "failed" the people they were trying to help. Participant 9, who runs an end-of-life care facility, explained the challenge of managing the "heartbreak" of grieving families following the death of their loved ones. She described how "hurtful" it is to dedicate so much time, energy, and personal involvement into ensuring one of their residents is comfortable and cared for during the last moments of their life, only to be the false target of guilt for their death. This experience was echoed by Participant 7, a caseworker and therapist through a program which focuses on keeping children in crisis out of inpatient treatment or juvenile detention. She explained the personal challenges associated with the cases where she isn't able to provide them with all the resources they need, or when her clients violate parole, which she is required to report. She described the guilt she feels in those instances of "failure," which many participants stated as one of the most challenging aspects of their jobs. Participant 12, a former nurse at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN emphasized the sense of helplessness when presented with "trainwreck" patients. For patients whose medical condition is unlikely to improve, she recounts "losing sleep" trying to think of some unforeseen solution to help them, often coming up short and feeling guilt that she can't "make them better."

They're Not Ready Yet. Moreover, an overly empathetic approach to someone else's experiences has the potential to bias the guidance participants offer. As Participant 8 explained, her own experience with disordered eating sometimes leads her to consider treatment for her patients through the lens of her own experiences. However, she reiterated that one of the primary unspoken rules of counseling is to make the appointment about the patient, not yourself. This presented a challenge to her at times, as she was able to drawn from her own experiences of what did and did not work for her during her own healing process but needed to continually reinforce

the patient's autonomy as their own person. Stated plainly, what worked for her may not work for her patients, and it's important to gauge where the patient is in their healing process separate from her own. Even if the guidance she wanted to offer is in the patient's best interest, offering it at the wrong time in the therapeutic process will diminish the benefits it may present.

Making Sense of the Past through Helping Others

It Could Always Be Worse. Continual exposure to the adverse experiences of others also exposed participants to more opportunities to revisit their adverse experiences and make sense of them. A majority of participants emphasized the diversity of perspectives their work offered them, allowing for them to review their past experiences in "ten different ways" they hadn't considered before (Participant 7). Through repeatedly reexamining their own experiences, participants were able to come to new conclusions and broaden their understanding of how adversity affected their lives. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 11 all described the sense of gratitude they felt for "the struggles that are mine instead of someone else's" (Participant 11), putting their own experiences into perspective. Juxtaposed alongside the adverse experiences of others, some participants took solace in the fact that they didn't have to experience the challenges others faced. As participant 11 stated regarding the comparison of her client's experiences to her own,

> "It makes me extremely thankful. When I see the women [at this organization] it makes me stop and be thankful for the way my life has turned out and the lessons I learned"

Everything Happened for a Reason. In addition to the gratitude participants expressed, there was a repeated theme of the participants' careers providing a sense of meaning or purpose to their adverse experiences. The general consensus still acknowledges that the adverse experience was undesired but begins to reframe the experiences through their transformational qualities. As Participant 1 explains:

> "My mom dying [was] a huge thing I didn't ask for. I did nothing wrong to make it happen. This has nothing to do with me and yet now I am broken because of it. [But I gained knowledge and maturity from my trauma and] excel[led] regardless of whether or not I have these broken pieces."

She came to this realization in part through her work mentoring young adults in the youth program at her church and began to take comfort not only in the notion that her experiences of trauma could still result in something positive, but that she could apply the lessons she learned in a way that helps others. When asked about any defining moments which led to their career decision to serve others at a prosocial organization, several participants couldn't point to one specific instance, but instead referenced an accumulation of experiences that built toward their current identity, both personally and professionally. Participant 7 expressed a sense of profound appreciation for all the experiences that led to her current career, explaining:

> "Everything led me to this point of where I wanted to be working with the people I wanted to work with…I wouldn't trade it because it prepared me for exactly what I needed once I got here."

Moreover, some participants even found a sense of gratitude for the actual adversity itself, citing it as the reason for their personal growth. For example, referencing his traumatic childhood experiences Participant 10 stated:

> "I think it's very likely my life experiences growing up made me do things the way I do, and I'm sure had I had a different life growing up I maybe wouldn't be someone in the same way. In a sense I owe it to my parents that they made me the person I am now where I can help people, whereas maybe I would have been a selfish person."

Discussion

In this discussion, I will first reexamine the role of generativity and posttraumatic growth in the careers of employees at prosocial organizations, highlighting the ways employees enact generative behaviors through their work duties. I will then consider how people make decisions about their occupations, and the implications of those decisions on their sense of identity and the

ways they make sense of their adverse experiences. The section will end with discussion of theoretical implications this research presents as well as suggestions for future research.

Generativity, Posttraumatic Growth, and Prosocial Organizations

When considering generativity, posttraumatic growth, and prosocial organizations, one can determine that there is at least one concept linking the three: acknowledging the importance of something greater than oneself. Erikson's (1950) conceptualization of generativity as the desire to manifest a better future for the next generation fits neatly into the tendency for those experiencing PTG to feel a heightened sense of interconnectedness with the world around them and the communities they are part of (Groleau et al., 2013). Taken together, it seems obvious for prosocial organizations to be a concentration of both generative individuals and those who have experienced PTG, particularly given the overall purpose of prosocial organizations to provide some form of benefit for humankind (Salamon, 1995). The present study further supports this notion, evident in the associations identified between generativity, PTG, and employment at a prosocial organization. Specifically, that the integration of adverse experiences into one's self-identity was positively linked to degrees of PTG (H1), the generativity of employees at prosocial organizations was positively linked to PTG (H2), and the experience of adversity that alters core beliefs was positively associated with generativity among employees of prosocial organizations (H3). Taken together, the support for this study's hypotheses and the findings of the interviews created a holistic view of the experiences of those employed by prosocial organizations, both in the participants initial decisions to pursue a career dedicated to helping others and in the ways they actually go about helping others through their work. In this way, the qualitative and quantitative data reflexively influenced and reified one another, as the insights gleaned from the

interviews provided nuance to the associations found through the surveys, and the empirical support provided by the surveys lent theoretical credence to the themes present in the interviews.

Furthermore, the relationship among concern for others, experience of PTG, and the decision to work within a prosocial organization was emphasized through the themes present in the interviews conducted with employees of prosocial behaviors with experiences of adversity. Especially considering the numerous ways participants described implementing knowledge from their adverse experiences through the work they do as employees of prosocial organizations, the findings of this research support the idea that one's career can serve as a context for continual PTG, sensemaking of adverse experiences, identity construction, and expression of generativity.

Expressing Generativity through Career Duties

As the quantitative survey data indicated, employment at a prosocial organization was positively associated with high degrees of generativity and PTG, supporting the hypotheses posed. This association coincides with the aforementioned theoretical overlap present in the importance each concept places on fostering a sense of community and interconnectedness. Additionally germane to the present study, however, was a closer understanding of how that generativity is expressed by the employees of prosocial organizations. Participants described their career duties, as well as their motivation to enact those career duties, and an underlying theme of concern for the next generation emerged from their responses. Specific phrasing highlighted this concern, for example describing their motivation to help others as a result of their own support and referring to this concept as a "pay it forward situation" (Participant 1). Though the participants' word choice was not always as explicitly indicative of generativity, their thoughts and actions fell squarely within the confines of generative behavior McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) identified on their Generative Behavior Checklist.

Moreover, the connection of participants' past adverse experiences to their methods providing help to others suggested an expression of generative resilience, as Carr (2020) described. In the participants desire to use their own experiences as a "hidden resource" (Participant 7) promotes the conceptualization of traumatic events as a facilitator of growth for the next generation of people who the participants are able to offer guidance. This expression of generative resilience presented significant benefits to both the participants and those they serve. For participants, the integration of their adverse experiences into their approach to work at a prosocial organization promotes the sensemaking necessary to experience PTG (Groleau et al., 2013), as well as the opportunity to find their professional careers fulfilling and meaningful. One participant clearly indicated her gratitude for being able to use her traumatic experiences to help others, identifying this ability as a particularly rewarding element of her work (Participant 1). Though her ability to utilize her experiences through her career duties is not a requirement for her experience of PTG, it certainly served as a salient factor in her continual journey with PTG following her adversity, and further consideration of this concept in research is suggested.

Intersection of Occupational and Self-Identities

As suggested by the association between job involvement and employment at a prosocial organization, those in the helping profession largely consider themselves through the lens of their occupation. One participant stated that she does not work as a nurse, she *is* a nurse, and this identification with her occupational role presented an interesting case study for the interconnectedness of self-identity and occupational identity for those employed by prosocial organizations. This becomes especially salient for those whose career decisions were informed by highly central adverse experiences, as the experience itself is likely to become integrated into their concept of self-identity due to the importance they place on the event (Groleau et al, 2013).

Moreover, “professional helpers” engage in a great degree of emotional involvement with those they interact with through their careers, particularly in instances of self-disclosure of their own adverse experiences in an effort to better relate to their clients. This approach of putting a piece of themselves into nearly every interaction they facilitate breeds a strong sense of job involvement and identification with the prosocial organization where they work as well as the specific roles they enact at that organization (Hoole & Boshoff, 1998). Furthermore, the blurring of self-identity and occupational identity can be conceptualized along the lines of nested identities, with each reflexively fitting within the confines of the other (Meisenbach and Kramer, 2014). For some participants, their concept of identity layers together adverse experiences, a helping personality, and prosocial work, subsuming both self-identity and occupational identity within a broader sense of who they are.

With this creation of a personal and professional identity informed by past adverse experiences comes significant benefits to both employees of prosocial organizations and those they serve. Higher degrees of involvement or identification with one’s career are positively associated with job satisfaction, personal wellbeing, and even organizational performance (Doerwald et al., 2020). Additionally, the employees’ personal involvement with their careers provides a more engaging and sensitive experience for those they serve, which ultimately enhances how effective their help will be (Davies, Todahl, & Reichard, 2015).

However, this entanglement of personal and professional identities can present barriers to employees of prosocial organizations. High levels of identification with the situations their clients describe always carries the potential for experience of secondary trauma or the triggering of posttraumatic distress, as the employees find themselves being repeatedly exposed to troubling experiences. This potential for secondary trauma in turn reinforces the high levels of

burnout and great degrees of turnover present within the helping professions, with physicians three to four times more likely than other professions to experience secondary trauma and the associated burnout (Rotenstein et al., 2018).

Theoretical Implications

The present study contributes to the existing body of literature surrounding organizational communication in its examination of job involvement, generativity, and PTG within the context of prosocial organizations. Though the generalizability of this research is limited, both the qualitative and quantitative findings may serve as a foundation for future consideration of the integration of PTG into career decisions and organizational behaviors. Subsequent research, perhaps with a larger sample size and broader inclusion criteria, has the potential to reveal possible significant relationships between generativity and PTG on a person's vocational decisions.

As suggested in the qualitative findings, the expression of generativity within prosocial organizations was commonplace among participants, with the actual behaviors enacted varying dependent on the type of organization where they worked. Further analysis of specific generative behaviors may serve to be beneficial not only for organizational communication research, but also for identifying the plethora of ways in which people express their concern for future generations in their interpersonal communication or through their approach to family communication as they pass on wisdom to their children. Better understanding the ways which people enact generative concern allows for a more comprehensive Generative Behaviors Checklist (McAdams and de St. Aubin, 1992) as well as a starting point for continued research to

examine how this generative behavior influences a person's relationships, both personal and professional.

Though not the primary focus of this research, the findings also raise interesting questions regarding the role of emotional involvement and personal identification with one's work on the experience of burnout and secondary trauma within the helping profession. Research has previously indicated a significant relationship between the helping professions and burnout (Rotenstein et al., 2018); however, the present study suggests additional factors which contribute to levels of burnout, for example experience of PTG or sense of occupational identity. Future research to more closely examine those relationships may shed light on preventative measures employees may take to ensure their physical and emotional energy isn't depleted due to lack of effective self-care practices.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present research aimed to minimize errors in interpretation of its findings by engaging in member checking and in creating an interview guide which was specific without leading participants to a given conclusion. However, the small sample size for both quantitative and qualitative analysis presents a significant challenge to generalizability of findings. Thus, this research should serve as a foundational support for future research. Furthermore, the reported experiences of the participants are within the high stress context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have inflated feelings of burnout among the participants as employees of prosocial organizations. With regards to the demographic diversity of the sample, this study tended to skew more toward white, female employees of prosocial organizations, which serves as a potential limit to the cultural diversity of the findings and their generalizability to other groups. Future researchers may consider more specific recruitment of other participants. Moreover, whereas

there was mention of the negative consequences associated with pursuing a career related to one's own difficult experiences, the present study primarily emphasized the positive outcomes and prosocial organization employees' experiences of PTG. Future research may benefit from a more direct examination of the challenges these employees face, as well as their potential to experience posttraumatic distress as a result of their careers in prosocial organizations. Finally, the consideration of both qualitative and quantitative within one study may inhibit the depth of analysis the researcher can include in discussion. For future examination of the relationships identified within this study, separating the qualitative and quantitative into individual studies is suggested to permit a larger space for discussion regarding the implications of the findings.

Overall**,** the notion that employees of prosocial organizations feel a keen sense of duty to help others is not a particularly surprising revelation. However, the present study aimed to identify more specific determinants of someone choosing a career within the helping profession, identifying experience of posttraumatic growth, centrality of event, and degree of generativity as potentially significant contributors. The quantitative data gathered from the surveys indicated that the degree a person integrates their adverse experiences into their self-identity and core beliefs is a likely contributor to their experience of PTG, their future career decisions within prosocial organizations, and their expression of generativity. In addition, the findings suggest that employment at a prosocial organization may enhance one's experience of PTG through the expression of generativity present in their career duties.

Furthermore, this study examined how a person's adverse experiences become part of their approach to helping others through their careers, highlighting both the benefit and the detriment this integration of experience presents, both for the helpers and those they aim to help. The qualitative findings suggest the sense of responsibility to help others felt by employees of

prosocial organization may be the result of their personal experiences receiving help during times of hardship, as some participants directly expressed the obligation they felt to “pay it forward” lest they be considered a hypocrite. Additionally, the interview participants continually expressed gratitude for the personal and professional growth they experienced as a result of their adversity. Though they ultimately maintain a lack of desire for having to experience adversity itself, the participants described their appreciation for the positive consequences brought by their adverse experiences, especially their ability to turn adversity into a “hidden resource” for helping the next generation. Although no causal association can be identified between adverse experience and dedicating one’s career to helping others, the findings of this research suggest deeper consideration of the ways one’s identity and accumulated experiences contribute to the way they interact with the world around them, both in their personal and professional lives.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's Product-Moment Correlations for Continuous Variables

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Generativity	2.64 (0.35)	-	.34*	.29	.46**
2. Centrality of Events	3.89 (0.90)		-	.61**	.66**
3. Posttraumatic Growth	4.27 (0.99)			-	.60**
4. Core Beliefs	4.17 (0.64)				-

Note. Generativity was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Centrality of events, posttraumatic growth, and the core beliefs inventory were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

** $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$*

Appendix A

Qualtrics Survey

Note. Survey format may change slightly during online conversion.

Section 1: Demographics

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your biological sex?
   Male
   Female
   Other (please specify):_____
   Prefer not to disclose

3. What is your ethnicity or race?
   White/Caucasian
   Native American
   Black/African American
   Asian/Asian American
   Latinx/Hispanic American
   Multiple ethnicity/Other (please specify): _____
   Prefer not to disclose

4. What is your current marital status?
   Single/Never been married
   Married/Domestic Partnership
   Divorced
   Prefer not to disclose

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   Did not attend school
   Elementary school
   Graduated from high school
   Some college
   Graduated from college
   Some graduate school
   Completed graduate school

6. What is your average household income, including yourself?
   Less than $10,000
   $10,000 to $14,999
   $15,000 to $24,999
   $25,000 to $49,999
   $50,000 to $99,999
   $100,000 to $149,999
   $200,000 or more

Section 2. Survey Measures to be completed by <u>all</u> participants

7. What type of social work organization do you work for? Please select the category that best describes the kind of work you do.

Substance abuse
Hospice & palliative care
Military & veterans
Child, family, and/or school
Psychiatric and/or developmental disabilities
Healthcare
Advocacy and community
Aging
Justice and corrections
Other (please specify): _____

8. How long have you worked at this organization? _____ years and _____ months

9. Is the organization nonprofit or for profit?

10. Are you still employed there?

Yes
No

11. What are/were your job duties? Briefly explain in the text box below.

[INSERT TEXT BOX HERE]

12. Sometimes, people who choose a career in social work can identify a difficult experience which led them down this particular path. For example, some people who work with recovering alcoholics may have had struggles with alcohol themselves, or may have had parents or family members who were alcoholics.

Thinking about your own life experiences, why did you become involved in this type of career? Please select the category that best describes the MOST important reason for your selected career. (You will have a chance to expand on this answer later. ☺)

I am/was affected by these issues.
Someone close to me is/was affected by these issues.
I have no personal ties; I am just interested in helping people with these issues.

13. **Loyola Generativity Scale** (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992)

For each of the following statements, please indicate how often the statement applies to you, by marking either a "0," "1," "2," or "3."

Mark "0" if the statement never applies to you.
Mark "1" if the statement only occasionally or seldom applies to you.
Mark "2" if the statement applies to you fairly often.
Mark "3" if the statement applies to you very often or nearly always.

1. I try to pass along the knowledge I have gained through my experiences.
2. I do not feel that other people need me.
3. I think I would like the work of a teacher.
4. I feel as though I have made a difference to many people.
5. I do not volunteer to work for a charity.
6. I have made and created things that have had an impact on other people.
7. I try to be creative in most things that I do.
8. I think that I will be remembered for a long time after I die.
9. I believe that society cannot be responsible for providing food and shelter for all homeless people.
10. Others would say that I have made unique contributions to society.
11. If I were unable to have children of my own, I would like to adopt children.
12. I have important skills that I try to teach others.
13. I feel that I have done nothing that will survive after I die.
14. In general, my actions do not have a positive effect on others.
15. I feel as though I have done nothing of worth to contribute to others.
16. I have made many commitments to many different kinds of people, groups, and activities in my life.
17. Other people say that I am a very productive person.
18. I have a responsibility to improve the neighborhood in which I live.
19. People come to me for advice.
20. I feel as though my contributions will exist after I die.

Section 3. Survey Measures to be completed ONLY by participants who responded that their career choice was related to their own difficult experiences or the experiences of those close to them. (Only for difficult life experience block on Qualtrics)

14. In just a few words or sentences, please briefly describe the crisis or experience that lead you to be involved in your chosen career. You can provide as much or as little information as you'd like. You will have a chance to talk more about this later.

[INSERT TEXT BOX HERE]

15. Thinking about the difficult experience that impacted your career choice you identified in the question, approximately how long ago did this occur?

_____ months ago

16. How long you have been dealing with/have you dealt with this difficult experience that impacted your career choice?

_____ months

17. Thinking about the same difficult experience that impacted your career choice, how stressful was this event to you when it occurred?

Not stressful at all						The most stress I have ever experienced
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

18. Thinking about the same difficult experience that impacted your career choice, how stressful is this event now?

Not stressful at all						The most stress I have ever experienced
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

19. Thinking about the same difficult experience that impacted your career choice, how much did this event impact your life overall?

Not at all						A great deal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

20**. Posttraumatic Growth Inventory** (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996)

Instructions: For each of the statements below, indicate the degree to which this change occurred in your life as the result of the crisis or difficult experience that impacted your career choice, using the following scale. Remember that you should ONLY consider the extent to which this change occurred as the result of this difficult experience.

I did not experience this change	I experienced this change to a very small degree	I experienced this change to a small degree	I experienced this change to a moderate degree	I experienced this change to a great degree	I experienced this to a very great degree.
0	1	2	3	4	5

1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life. (V)
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life. (V)
3. I developed new interests. (II)
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance. (Ill)

5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters. (IV)
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble. (I)
7. I established a new path for my life. (II)
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others. (I)
9. I am more willing to express my emotions. (I)
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties. (III)
11. I am able to do better things with my life. (II)
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out. (Ill)
13. I can better appreciate each day. (V)
14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise. (II)
15. I have more compassion for others. (I)
16. I put more effort into my relationships. (I)
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing. (II)
18. I have a stronger religious faith. (N)
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was. (III)
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are. (I)
21. I better accept needing others. (I)

21**. Core Beliefs Inventory** (Cann et al., 2010)

Instructions: Please reflect upon the difficult experience that impacted your career choice and indicate the extent to which it led you to seriously examine each of the following core beliefs.

Not at all	To a very small degree	To a small degree	To a moderate degree	To a great degree	To a very great degree.
0	1	2	3	4	5

1. Because of this experience, I seriously examined the degree to which I believe things that happen to people are fair.
2. Because of this experience, I seriously examined the degree to which I believe things that happen to people are controllable.
3. Because of this experience, I seriously examined my assumptions concerning why other people think and behave the way that they do.
4. Because of this experience, I seriously examined my beliefs about my relationships with other people.
5. Because of this experience, I seriously examined my beliefs about my own abilities, strengths and weaknesses.
6. Because of this experience, I seriously examined my beliefs about my expectations for my future.
7. Because of this experience, I seriously examined my beliefs about the meaning of my life.
8. Because of this experience, I seriously examined my spiritual or religious beliefs.
9. Because of this experience, I seriously examined my beliefs about my own value or worth as a person.

22**. Centrality of Event Scale** (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006)

Instructions: Please reflect upon the difficult experience that impacted your career choice and answer the questions with it in mind.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. This experience has become a reference point for the way I understand new experiences.
2. I automatically see connections and similarities between this experience and experiences in my present life.
* 3. I feel that this experience has become part of my identity.
4. This experience can be seen as a symbol or mark of important themes in my life.
5. This experience is making my life different from the life of most other people.
* 6. This experience has become a reference point for the way I understand myself and the world.
7. I believe that people who haven't experienced this type of thing think differently than I do.
8. This experience tells a lot about who I am.
9. I often see connections and similarities between this experience and my current relationships with other people.
*10. I feel that this experience has become a central part of my life story.
11. I believe that people who haven't experienced this type of thing have a different way of looking upon themselves than I have.
*12. This experience has colored the way I think and feel about other experiences.
13. This experience has become a reference point for the way I look upon my future.
14. If I were to weave a carpet of my life, this experience would be in the middle with threads going out to many other experiences.
15. My life story can be divided into two main chapters: one is before and one is after this experience happened.
*16. This experience permanently changed my life.
*17. I often think about the effects this experience will have on my future.
*18. This experience was a turning point in my life.
19. If this experience had not happened to me, I would be a different person today.
20. When I reflect upon my future, I often think back to this experience.

Thank you for participating in this survey! We truly appreciate your time. ☺

(ONLY FOR DIFFICULT LIFE EXPERIENCE BLOCK) If you are willing to talk with the researchers about your career choices and the experiences that led to them in a follow-up interview, please provide your email address below and one of the researchers will contact you directly to schedule a convenient time to talk.

Remember that if you complete both the survey and follow-up interview, you will be entered into a drawing to win a $25 Amazon gift card!

Email address: _____

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

The researcher will ask all participants the questions below and any follow up questions.

Researcher will introduce herself to the participant and confirm consent for audio recording.

1. Tell me about the organization where you are employed.
2. Tell me about your job.
    a. Do your job duties involve direct interaction with members of the population your organization serves?
3. Tell me about what drew you to this line of work.
4. Tell me about any defining moments in your life that informed your career decisions
5. Tell me about the best part of your job. The worst part?
6. Tell me about a time you felt your work at this organization was rewarding
7. Tell me about a time you felt your work at this organization was challenging.
8. How do you see your job in relation to your difficult life experiences?
9. How does your difficult life experience inform your daily life at work, and/or your interaction with the population your organization serves?
10. How does your job affect your feelings about your difficult life experiences?
11. If you were to start your professional career all over again, would you choose to work in the same profession? Explain.
12. Do you feel like your profession has shaped the way you see yourself? If yes, why and how?
13. If you didn't have the difficult life experience(s) you did, do you think you would still be in the same profession, or would you have pursued a different career? Explain.
14. Is there anything I didn't ask you about that you think I should have? Explain.

VITA

Miranda Christine McLoughlin was born on November 20, 1996, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is the daughter of Michael and Constance McLoughlin. She graduated from Broken Arrow High School in 2015. She then pursued her college education at the University of Oklahoma and earned a Bachelor of Art degree with a major in Communication Studies in May 2019.

After receiving her bachelor's degree, she became a full-time master's student in the Communication Studies program at Texas Christian University. During this time she worked as a graduate teaching and research assistant under the guidance of Dr. Paul Schrodt and Dr. Kristen Carr. She plans to earn her master's degree in May 2020 and enter the workforce as a research consultant,