

Social Support and Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) among OEF-OIF and American Korean War Veterans: A Mixed Research Study

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Abstract

War is a tragic human endeavor, sometimes leaving war veterans with continual or delayed traumas. However, adversity or highly stressful situations can serve as an opportunity for psychological gain or positive growth. The model of post-traumatic growth suggests that social support may contribute to facilitating veterans' positive growth after service. This study examines the impact of social support from fellow veterans upon positive growth of OEF-OIF and American Korean War veterans with a mixed-methodology approach, a focus group and a survey. The data was collected from 13 OEF-OIF veterans and 20 American Korea War veterans living in the Northwest Ohio region. Findings indicated that the older veterans showed more positive growth in the domains of relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. We learned that support, which came as a result of involvement with peers in the American Korean War Veterans Association, was critical for positive growth among older veterans in our study. In the end, further research into the effectiveness of the older veterans' potentially mentoring younger, returning veterans concerning the process of reintegration is necessary.

Keywords: Korean War, veteran, Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), social support

1. Introduction

War is a tragic human endeavor, sometimes leaving war veterans and civilians with continual or delayed traumas (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Previous research indicated that war veterans suffer high rates of psychological problems, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), major depression, substance abuse, suicidality, and traumatic brain injury (Clapp & Beck, 2012; Tomassetti-Long, Nicholson, Madson, & Dahlen, 2014; Youssef, Green, Beckham, & Elbogen, 2013). The prevalence rate of PTSD among Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans varies between 10-30%, with many suffering from co-morbid conditions, which make the veteran's reintegration into family and community more difficult (Jeffreys, Capehart, & Freidman, 2012).

However, adversity can work as an opportunity for psychological gain or positive challenges to growth (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While traumatic events produce many negative psychological effects, a survivor's traumatic experience might also provoke positive psychological changes in perception of the self, known as posttraumatic growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Many studies documented evidence of PTG reported by survivors for various types of traumatic events, including life-threatening illnesses (Hefferon, Greal, & Mutrie, 2009; Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006), bereavement (Joseph & Linley, 2005), earthquake survival (He, Xu, & Wu, 2013), infertility (Yu, Peng, Chen, Long, He, Li, & Wang, 2013), breast cancer (Cohen & Numa, 2011), and sexual abuse (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001). PTG has significant meaning for the psychological health of survivors because their PTG indicates that they have adapted in some way to traumas with improved psychological functioning in specific domains (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). However, remarkably few studies examined PTG among military veterans, particularly involving OEF-OIF veterans (Rosner & Powell, 2006). Larner and Blow (2011) emphasized that studies of war veteran trauma should be different from that of the victims of other trauma, such as a natural disaster, a severe car accident, or a terminal illness, because survivors of war trauma may consider themselves as both a victim and perpetrator at the same time.

Furthermore, there has been no comparative study between younger and older veterans concerning PTG. For most OEF-OIF veterans at the young-adulthood stage, traumatic symptoms of PTSD can have a lasting impact on their life trajectories (Elder & Clipp, 1989). Pietrzak and Cook (2013) indicated that almost 70% of older veterans who have endured a high number of traumas in their lifetime are psychologically resilient in later life. This suggests that older veterans must have valuable information to share concerning their life course. Accordingly, comparing PTG between older and younger veterans may provide valuable insights into the process leading to better long-term psychological outcomes of veterans. In this context, understanding what factors enhance their posttraumatic growth is an important goal for health care professionals to help these populations age successfully (Lee & Mason, 2013). In addition, recently most studies of veterans have been conducted using quantitative methods, and there is a need for qualitative research to compare differences in meaning making among veterans (Larner & Blow, 2011). Seeking to address these deficiencies, our study focuses upon positive growth of OEF-OIF and American Korean War (AKW) veterans with a mixed-methodology approach combining both the qualitative and quantitative method. The purposes of the study are as follows: (1) to identify PTG among OEF-OIF and AKW veterans, and (2) to examine the roles of social support from fellow veterans for their posttraumatic growth.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)

Posttraumatic growth refers to the subjective experience of substantial, psychological, positive change reported by an individual as a result of attempts to struggle with trauma (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). It was not until the 1990s that systematic, empirical work was conducted involving the psychological positive change that occurs as a result of traumatic events. Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996) first coined the term 'post-traumatic growth (PTG)' to describe personal growth achieved through a traumatic event. PTG is a similar concept to resilience, in that both are achieved through a process to overcome significant adversity. However, PTG differs from resilience in the achieved level, i.e., PTG goes beyond resilience and transforms the person (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). In addition, PTG requires long-term change to achieve, while resilience occurs during a relatively short period of time (Zerach, Solomon, Cohen, & Ein-Dor, 2013).

It is important to note that PTG, reported by survivors, does not put an end to their traumatic symptoms, but indicates that they have adapted in some way to traumas with improved psychological functioning in specific domains (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). To assess PTG of trauma survivors, the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) has been developed, including five domains: renewed appreciation of life, new possibilities, enhanced personal strength, improved relationships with others, and spiritual change (Taku, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2008). Using the PTGI, research relative to war found posttraumatic growth of military veterans with amputation (Phelps, Williams, Raichle, Turner, & Ehde, 2008) and traumatic brain injury (McGrath & Linley, 2006). Among previously deployed U.S. Army soldiers, those with the higher number of combat experiences also reported significantly higher overall PTG scores, with an inverse relationship between PTG and suicidal ideation (Galloway, Millikan, & Bell, 2011; Bush, Skopp, McCann, & Luxton, 2011). Lee, Luxton, Roger, and Gahm (2010) performed the factor analysis of the PTGI with combat veterans, finding it valid as both a multidimensional and unidimensional measure of PTG in combat veterans.

2.2. Social Support and PTG

The current research is based on Calhoun and Tedeschi's model of PTG, which put theoretical emphasis on roles of social support for positive change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The PTG model emphasized that the extent to which individuals self-disclose their emotions and their perspective on their crisis, and how others respond to their self-disclosure, may influence their positive growth (Currier, Lisman, Tait, Harris, & Erbes, 2013; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In this context, the social support may facilitate survivors' posttraumatic growth, only when done in a supportive environment meeting the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) stressed the potential benefits of social support experiences in facilitating PTG through mutual support groups, because they provide discussion of perspective, offering of beliefs, and the use of metaphor to explain experiences. More positive perceptions of support resources are likely to result in more frequent interactions with supportive significant others, which provides more opportunities for cognitive processing, including meaning making, for the traumatic event, eventually leading to the development of new life narratives for individuals (Larner & Blow, 2011). Social support may influence posttraumatic growth because it enables survivors to tolerate continuing distress as they keep working to cope (Weiss, 2002). Accordingly, social support may play a strong role in the development of posttraumatic growth only when it remains stable and consistent over time (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). One research study involving veterans from the first Gulf War reported that post-deployment social support was positively associated with PTG on the level of personal strength and relating to others (Maguen, Vogt, King, King, & Litz, 2006). Unit member support was also significantly associated with higher scores of PTG of older Reservist and National Guard OEF-OIF veterans (Pietrzak, Goldstein, Malley, Rivers, Johnson, Morgan, & Southwick, 2010).

3. Methods

This study employed a mixed-methodology approach with concurrent triangulation design, collecting, analyzing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to understand given research problems (Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004). Qualitative methodology was adopted to identify the roles of social support from fellow veterans for their posttraumatic growth among AKW veterans and OEF-OIF veterans, while the quantitative method was used to examine any differences in PTG scores between both groups. Qualitative and quantitative findings were compared and integrated for data interpretation. The target population for the study was drawn from the list of veterans who attended meetings at the local chapter of the Korean War Veterans Association, for older veterans, and from the Non-Traditional and Transfer Student Office at a local university for young veterans. A member of the research team attended several meetings of the Korean War Veterans Association to explain the project and recruit participants. Another research team member worked with the Non-Traditional and Transfer Student Office to recruit study participants who self-identified as OEF-OIF veterans. The participants in this study served in the military during the Korean War, Operation Enduring Freedom and/or Operation Iraqi Freedom; therefore, Korean War veterans who were not actually in Korea were excluded. Each person identified as a potential participant was sent a letter explaining the study and an invitation to participate in. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bowling Green State University in August, 2013, and a consent form was obtained from each participant.

3.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Twenty American Korean War (AKW) veterans and thirteen OEF-OIF veterans participated in the current study (see Table 1). The mean age of AKW veterans was 83 years old and 95% were Caucasian Americans. 80% of them were living with a spouse and 90% of participants graduated high school and more. The mean age of OEF-OIF veterans was 32 years old and 85% were Caucasian Americans. 69% of them were currently enrolling in a university after their deployment with a benefit of the GI bill. Of the participants, 9 males and 4 females participated in the study.

3.2. Qualitative Procedures

We invited study participants to a local university in Ohio and conducted a total of seven focus groups during October and November of 2013. Focus groups were scheduled to accommodate the participants' schedules and travel ability. The focus groups, facilitated by two or three members of the research team, were conducted in an average duration of one-and-a-half hours. The interviews with participants were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. The analysis of the data was based on coding-based analysis and a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The authors independently reviewed the data from the audio recordings and transcripts, as well as notes composed by the authors and research assistants, looking for key words through a paragraph-by-paragraph analysis. This thematic analysis process allowed us to summarize and categorize the data into an interpretative framework, combining them into pertinent sub-themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards & Morse, 2007).

3.3. Quantitative Procedures

Using a questionnaire, we collected information concerning demographics and posttraumatic growth from participants. Posttraumatic growth was measured by the standardized instrument, the 21-item version of PTGI, to assess positive growth in five domains: Relating to Others (7 items), New Possibilities (5 items), Personal Strength (4 items), Spiritual Change (2 items), and Appreciation of Life (3 items) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("Not at All True") to 5 ("Very True"). Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996) indicated that Cronbach's alpha for PTGI total scores is 0.90 in their study. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha is 0.94. The survey data was analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics 21). An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine how AKW veterans and OEF-OIF veterans differ in 21 items for posttraumatic growth. An alpha level of 0.05 (i.e., confidence interval of 95%) was used. The equality of variances between groups was tested with Levene's statistics. When the Levene's test was significant, the significance level was adjusted for unequal variances.

4. Results

4.1. Qualitative Components

4.1.1. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Some participants were still suffering from war-related psychological problems, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). While the focus group was going on, one AKW veteran was unable to express himself about what he had experienced in the war, nearly coming to tears and stating, "60 years isn't enough. I served in Korea in the 3rd Division for nine months. I can't remember anything that happened after that... I don't know if I had a concussion or what... I just can't talk about it." Another older veteran also reported difficulty with memory and night terrors stating, "Yea, I had issues with remembering everything over there... it bothered me sleeping... I'd wake up screaming and hollering." An additional older veteran experienced difficulty with loud noises saying, "I think one of the things that bothered me most after I got home was around the 4th of July, when the fireworks would go off. I kind a want to disappear." OEF-OIF veterans were also frequently suffering from psychological challenges. During a focus group an OEF-OIF subject noted, "The nightmares, they don't go away... the nightmares, the screaming, all that." A female veteran suggested similar challenges noting, "My husband and I have some mutual experiences in our deployments so we're able to relate. Like if he has nightmares or if he's yelling or whatever else, you know it doesn't bother me because he does the same for me."

4.1.2. Social Support from Fellow Veterans

Support from veteran peers was also a strong foundational bridge for their adjusting to society after their services. Veterans in our study accept needing others and have compassion for others.

Their work with their respective veteran organizations is a positive way to invest their time and to encourage positive change, ultimately providing them with a sense of gratification. As one subject mentioned: "I'm a life member of the American Legion, the VFW, the Korean War Veterans. I've been very active in all of those... I've had some very good experiences with all the organizations and the camaraderie is there... I think the veterans' organizations are the best thing in the world for any veteran to join." One participant said that he just never thought about anything concerning his service until he joined the American Legion, where he has been a 60-year member. In fact, he is an active, life member of the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and the Korean War Veteran Association. Overall, many AKW veterans voiced strong support for joining veterans' organizations and were proud in their membership. They believe that such organizations offer valuable socializing opportunities for themselves, and their wives who join the auxiliary. Also, they believe such organizations foster military bonds among members, who understand the military community and its respective structures.

Like older veterans, younger veterans also enjoy a strong network as a result of their shared experience. Subjects in our study expressed that current or former military-service personnel had been supportive and may have played a critical role in the younger veterans' reintegration. As one younger veteran noted, there is a sense of brotherhood between them and many encourage each other: "We have a family in the military and we...that's how we deal with it and our friends, they're military; they're usually not civilians...if you're in a crisis would you know where the card is and what to do? I could call my buddy...our squad leader or someone. Like we go to our unit or if we need to just drive down to the Army and say 'hey, I need help with this,' and they should be able to help us." Another younger veteran also claimed, "How you have your friends from the military and you're on that mutual ground; there's that safe zone. Um, when you have civilian friends it's...you kind a feel not there with them. It's like you have something that's separate from them."

4.1.3. Posttraumatic growth (PTG)

Through our research, we found that our subjects displayed positive changes in all five domains: personal strength, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual change after the stressful event. For instance, they accept needing others and have compassion for others. They also have a better understanding of spiritual matters, recognize the importance of volunteering, and demonstrate altruism toward others.

4.1.3.1. Improvement in Relating to Others

A common feeling among veterans is a sense that nobody, except another veteran, understands their experiences. As one AKW veteran stated, "As far as my military life, I never wanted to really talk about it...I didn't really until I joined this group, the Korean War veterans, which has been...it has helped me to this day." As members of this organization, AKW veterans are able to share one another's stories. Through the act of witnessing they obtain knowledge of each other's experiences and come to better understand what to expect over time, leading to insights concerning healthy modes of coping. During one focus group a veteran shared, "The Korean War veterans, which has been – has helped me to this day when I stop and think of some of the things and we get chit-chatting about it. They can tell you your problems and well maybe I have the same problem, you know, and get it straightened out just by talking."

A fellow AKWV research subject contributed,

"We would get a couple of us together and sit down and talk. It helped a lot because if you started to think about things you could discuss them with them...It went on for thirty-seven years."

For younger veterans, the desire to connect with other veterans and to help each other is a frequently expressed sentiment. One subject claimed,

"You're not the only one that lost somebody over there...quit feeling sorry for yourself...There's a wall there when you get back and sometimes it takes a long time to get past the wall, but sometimes if you have somebody strong enough to break it for you and to be there for you, you can get – you can move on, but you will never forget." She added,

"When the nightmares happen and stuff like that, I'm the person that gets the calls in the middle of the night and they cry and – or I get the text message saying that I just saw her or I just saw him. And that person's dead and they're just like losing their minds."

4.1.3.2. A Greater Appreciation of Life

Among older veterans, there was a general sense of thankfulness. This is revealed in such comments as, “I’m glad I did [lived]...have a good life, got a good family, and got a good life.”

In addition, one veteran highlighted that being in the war helped him understand how much he had taken for granted, stating,

“What I appreciate mostly was being in Korea for 1950 and ’52, and how they lived compared to how we live in the United States. We shouldn’t complain.”

Another veteran was grateful for living through the war and returning uninjured, saying,

“I guess what’s most stressful, though I’m so lucky, to be back and not be injured, and thank God for it because I had two brothers in the Navy in World War II and one brother-in-law in World War II that never came back and they never found his body.”

One young veteran later expressed his changed worldview after service, commenting,

“When I come home now and my life after, I’m a different – I’m more aware of my surroundings, but I’m more appreciative of the things I have compared to most people.”

4.1.3.3. New Possibilities

Both veteran-group members tend to be open to new possibilities. Even older veterans involved in the study pursued their academic goals, actively getting involved in the community. An AKW veteran stated,

“I got my diploma in 2004 with my youngest granddaughter, me and another fellow; he was a Korean vet, his granddaughter graduated.”

Another older participant who solved his alcohol problem went as far as seeking a positive outlet by becoming a VFW representative and helping other veterans with their alcohol problems. He said,

“When I was in jail and I had time to think about it... I just quit drinking and learned to live with it...my wife, my family is more important than that. I’m a VFW representative. I’ve been on there for eighteen years and we’ve helped a lot of veterans who come in there and have this problem...I enjoy doing it. I know what I went through, because they didn’t have that.”

A younger veteran also demonstrated new possibilities, adding,

“I deployed as a brand new E5, came back an E6, and my wife told me that I was a big change...I was a fun-loving person, a free spirit, yeah. It’s a different guy than – you know I went and got my bachelor’s, now I’m getting my master’s, now I’m going to become an officer hopefully...yeah, maturity for me.”

Another OIF/OEF veteran contributed,

“When I retire, that’s why I’m getting a Master’s in education, I’m trying to like, maybe, get into education at the executive level and that’s something I would definitely try and do if I ever got there but it would be a few years until I retire.”

4.1.3.4. An Increased Sense of Personal Strength

During the focus groups, some AKW veterans expressed that they gained personal strength during their military service. An AKW veteran stated, “Well, I grew up. I learned a lot... Some came back; some didn’t.” One veteran asserted, “I had confidence in myself that I never had before above and beyond it.” In addition, another veteran said,

“You’re eighteen years old, sixteen, fifteen, when you are going into the service. In boot camp you meet every kind of individual that there is in the world...in three months in boot camp...I learned more about people ...you meet all these guys and you learn to cope with them... you learn who to trust, who to push aside.”

During one focus group an OEF-OIF veteran added,

“Basically I can tackle anything after that. If I don’t do PT [exercise] in the morning it’s like this day’s gonna be a long day, kind a that way. So basically that’s always been my mechanism.”

4.1.3.5. Spiritual Development

For the participants in our study, religion emerged as a strong coping mechanism for older veterans and appears to have led them toward more positive change

One AKW veteran spoke passionately about his faith:

“I was very fortunate. And most of my life has been that way. I’ve come—been through a number of close calls with God’s providence protected me through all of that...I learned to pray from that, and all the time I was—until I— I became born again through a tragedy when I thought my wife was going to die.”

One participant was especially forthcoming, tying his religious faith to positive change, stating:

“So I should read the Bible. I started at the beginning...Even though I had that background faith in God, it didn't make sense to me until I made the commitment that I'm gonna follow the beginning of the book...He[God] said, ‘Unless you be born again, you can't see the Kingdom of God.’ Oh, that's what happened. ‘Cause people were telling me I had changed.”

4.2. Quantitative Components

4.2.1. Differences in PTG between AKW and OEF-OIF Veterans

The independent t-test analysis showed that there were significant mean differences in three domains, such as improved relationship with others, renewed appreciation of life, and spiritual change between younger and older veterans. Specifically, older AKW veterans had significant, higher scores in all 10 out of 21 variables than younger OEF-OIF veterans, i.e., appreciation for the life (older M= 4.05, SD= 0.71, younger M= 3.08, SD= 1.38, $p<.05$), better understanding of spiritual matters (older M= 3.68, SD= 1.20, younger M= 2.42, SD= 1.73, $p<.05$), counting on people in times of trouble (older M= 3.53, SD= 1.02, younger M= 2.54, SD= 1.45, $p<.05$), a sense of closeness with others (older M= 3.47, SD= 0.91, younger M= 2.62, SD= 0.96, $p<.05$), expressing emotions (older M= 3.37, SD= 1.01, younger M= 2.31, SD= 1.65, $p<.05$), appreciating every day (older M= 4.26, SD= 0.65, younger M= 3.46, SD= 1.20, $p<.05$), compassion for others (older M= 4.16, SD= 0.77, younger M= 2.69, SD= 1.50, $p<.01$), putting effort into relationships (older M= 3.95, SD= 0.91, younger M= 2.92, SD= 1.61, $p<.05$), learned how wonderful people are (older M= 3.79, SD= 0.92, younger M= 2.69, SD= 1.49, $p<.05$), and accepting needing others (older M= 3.68, SD= 1.16, younger M= 2.38, SD= 1.39, $p<.01$) (see Table 2).

Interestingly, in all categories, younger veterans demonstrated no significantly higher scores. In fact, older veterans scored significantly higher than younger veterans in all 7 items related to the domain of improved relationship with others (i.e., counting on people in times of trouble, closeness with others, expressing-emotion, compassion, putting effort into relationships, learning how wonderful people are, and accepting needing others. In addition, older veterans also scored higher in two domains of PTG: renewed appreciation of life and spiritual change. In the remaining domains, such as new possibilities and enhanced personal strength, both groups showed similarly high scores, i.e., developing new interests (older M= 3.21, SD= 1.81, younger M= 2.50, SD= 1.38), establishing a new path for my life (older M= 3.05, SD= 1.35, younger M= 3.17, SD= 1.19), being able to do better things with my life (older M= 3.53, SD= 0.77, younger M= 3.42, SD= 1.24), seeing that new opportunities are available (older M= 3.26, SD= 1.37, younger M= 3.25, SD= 1.42), being more likely to try to change things (older M= 3.68, SD= 1.06, younger M= 3.50, SD= 0.80), having a feeling of self-reliance (older M= 3.63, SD= 1.07, younger M= 3.75, SD= 1.21), knowing I can handle difficulties (older M= 3.47, SD= 1.12, younger M= 3.50, SD= 1.24), being able to accept the way things work out (older M= 3.79, SD= 0.85, younger M= 3.79, SD= 0.86), and having a stronger religious faith (older M= 3.63, SD= 1.12, younger M= 3.50, SD= 1.68). Overall, older veterans reported a mean total PTGI score of 76.56, which is considerably higher than the mean total PTG score of 63.02 reported by younger veterans (see Table 2).

5. Discussion

This study intended to identify and compare the role of social support from fellow veterans of older AKW and younger OEF-OIF and their level of posttraumatic growth. The results indicated that despite the traumatic stress, social support from peers has played a critical role in our veteran subjects adjusting well, or even positively changing, after discharge. Qualitative analysis indicated that older veterans than younger veterans have experienced more posttraumatic growth in all five domains, including improved relationships with others, renewed appreciation of life, new possibilities, enhanced personal strength, and spiritual change.

In the domain of improved relationships with others, older AKW veterans referred frequently to the Korean Veteran Association as being a foundational bridge for veteran's supporting each other, emphasizing that it played important roles in their daily lives. In the posttraumatic model, self-disclosure through narrative is an important beginning step in posttraumatic growth. A common feeling among veterans is a sense that nobody, except veteran peers, understands their experiences. In fact, many older participants indicated that they never wanted to discuss their military experiences until they joined the Korean War Veterans Association. Some of them reported that just witnessing to their fellow Korean War veterans helped them solve their problems, because they encounter common challenges. Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) underscored mutual support group sharing common experiences for PTG, trusting each other, and revealing themselves with expectation of acceptance. In the Korean War Veterans Association, members empowered one another through narratives of their own war and reintegration experiences, sharing what challenges returning veterans might expect to experience over time and offering insights concerning healthy coping. This is consistent with previous findings suggesting that participation in mutual, or peer, support groups may facilitate posttraumatic growth within the participants because exchanging stories of their own trauma may lead to self-disclosing and schema-reconstructing (McAdams, 1993).

Generally, younger OEF-OIF veterans also build a strong network with their comrades, who have similar experiences. One younger veteran stressed that "if you have your friends from the military and you're on that mutual ground, there's a safe zone because civilians do not understand your military experience." Moreover, there is a sense of brotherhood between OEF-OIF veterans, who encourage each other. One veteran stated, for example, "If you are down, you can call them and you 'don't stay in the valleys' so long." They frequently expressed that current or former military-service personnel were supportive and might have played a critical role in younger veterans' reintegration. In the domain of renewed appreciation of life, both veteran groups responded that being in the war helped them understand how much they had taken for granted. Overall, older participants expressed a general sense of thankfulness for their life, positively renegotiating what was most important in their lives. They were thankful that they had a good family and lived a good life. In particular, they appreciated their returning home safely from the Korean War. They also appreciated participation in the Korean War Veteran Association, expressing that such veteran organizations are extremely beneficial for any veteran to join. Younger veterans also expressed their appreciation for their life after their stressful war experiences. For example, one younger participant reported that when he came back home after deployment, he was more appreciative of the things he had. In the domain of new possibilities, both veteran-group members tend to be open to new possibilities. For older veterans, getting involved in the community is a positive way to keep them busy and to positively achieve personal change while obtaining a sense of gratification due to their work. One older participant, for instance, explained that he earned his diploma in 2004 with his youngest granddaughter and another AKW veteran who also graduated with his own granddaughter.

In the domain of enhanced personal strength, most veterans in our focus groups agreed that they gained more personal strength and had matured as a result of their military-service experience. They commonly utilized such expressions as "grew up," "learned a lot from service," and "learned to take care of [myself]." They also thought the war experiences had positively changed them. An AKW veteran stated, "I was initially 'young and dumb,' but [saw]war experience as an 'education' in [the] realities of life." In the domain of spiritual change, religion was emerged as a strong coping mechanism for older veterans, leading them toward more positive change. One AKW veteran spoke passionately about his faith that God protected him through his life and he became "born again" through a tragedy when his wife was going to die. One participant was especially forthcoming, directly tying his religious faith to positive change. In the end, religion or spirituality appeared to be a predictor of PTG for older veterans, which is consistent with the study that, in times of trauma, religion or spirituality can provide higher-order schemas which help to maintain meaning in life by giving individuals a universal and enduring sense of purpose (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Quantitative analysis in this study confirmed and complemented the qualitative findings, showing that older AKW veterans had significant, higher scores in all 10 out of 21 variables than younger OEF-OIF veterans. Overall, younger veterans had no significantly higher scores in any category than older veterans. Older veterans reported a mean total PTGI score of 76.56, which is considerably higher than the mean total PTG score of 63.02 reported by younger veterans. In particular, older veterans scored significantly higher than younger veterans in all 7 variables related to the domain of improved relationship with others. This finding supports qualitative findings in this study, indicating that the veteran associations served as a foundational network to support and empower veterans reciprocally through narratives of their own war experiences.

This finding suggests that though younger veterans benefited from a strong network comprised of their fellow service personnel, AKWVs found a more stable and fertile environment to facilitate development of their posttraumatic growth in ongoing, formal military-organization memberships. Older veterans also scored higher in two domains of PTG: renewed appreciation of life and spiritual change. Previous research reported that among patients with cancer or HIV the older used spirituality and religious coping more frequently than the younger (Derks, Leeuw, Hordijk, & Winnubst, 2005; Vance, Brennan, Enah, Smith, & Kaur, 2011). In the domains such as new possibilities and enhanced personal strength, both young and old veteran groups showed high scores. These findings are not in line with those of previous research studies that indicated that younger people, who are open to learning and change, tended to report more posttraumatic growth than older people, who might already have learned their life lessons (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). While the present study has revealed many interesting and valuable insights concerning social support and PTG, the present study admittedly has some limitations. First, since the target population was from a certain area of the United States, the findings from the quantitative data cannot be generalized because of small and potentially “non-representative” subject samples. Second, we focused upon male veterans (we successfully recruited only four female research participants), but in terms of the gender difference, women are shown to experience more growth (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006). Admittedly, women’s wartime experiences and challenges may be different from those of men when they reintegrate into their work, family, and social lives.

6. Conclusion

Overall, older participants in our study provided great insights concerning their post-service experiences and may serve as valuable mentors to veterans of modern-day conflicts as the younger service members reintegrate back into society. The experience of AKW veterans suggests that actively participating in a formal, social-support group, such as Korean War Veterans Association, may help veterans experience better long-term outcomes and change positively (Ben-Zeev, Corrigan, Britt, & Langford, 2012). The findings in this study may provide some insights into the process leading to adapting to traumas among veterans. In addition, this study is significant for health and social service providers (e.g., social work professionals and educators) who strive to help younger veterans recover from trauma, and avoid secondary problems, such as substance abuse and suicidal thinking based upon a strengths-focused and empowerment approach. Finally, understanding associations between social support and psychosocial functions in human behavior may be the first step to develop interventions for veterans to promote successful readjustment to civilian life and positive growth after deployment (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011). Service providers may work with older veterans who may be invaluable mentors in the process of reintegration among returning veterans.

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Table 1: Participant General Information (N=33)

| Veterans | | Korean War veterans N=20 (61%) | OEF/OIF veterans N=13 (39%) |
|--------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Demographics | | | |
| Gender | | Male only | Male: 9 Female: 4 |
| Age | Mean Age (SD) Range | 82.25 (1.97) 79 to 86 | 31.92 (10.19) 21 to 55 |
| Ethnicity | Caucasian American | 19 (95%) | 11 (84.6%) |
| | Hispanic/Latino American | 1 (5%) | 2 (15.4%) |
| Marital Status | Married | 16 (80%) | 4 (30.8%) |
| | Widowed/Divorced | 4 (20 %) | 4 (30.8%) |
| | Never married | | 5 (38.5%) |
| Level of Education | No High School | 2 (10%) | 0 |
| | Completed HS | 7 (35%) | 0 |
| | Vocational Training | 3 (15%) | 0 |
| | Some college | 0 | 9 (69.2%) |
| | Completed College and More | 8 (40%) | 4 (30.8%) |

Table 2: Mean of the Posttraumatic Growth (OEF-OIF veterans vs. AKW veterans) Independent Samples t-test Results

| Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) | Mean (OEF-OIF/AKW) | 95% CI of the difference | |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| | | Lower | Upper |
| Knowing that I can count on people | 2.54/3.53* | -1.959 | -0.017 |
| A sense of closeness with others | 2.62/3.47* | -1.554 | -0.162 |
| A willingness to express my emotion | 2.31/3.37* | -2.139 | -0.018 |
| Having compassion for others | 2.69/4.16** | -2.418 | -0.514 |
| Putting effort into my relationships | 2.29/3.95* | -1.933 | -0.115 |
| I learned about how wonderful people are | 2.69/3.79* | -1.966 | -0.228 |
| I accept needing others | 2.38/3.68* | -2.221 | -0.378 |
| I developed new interests | 2.54/3.21 | | |
| I established a new path for my life | 3.15/3.05 | | |
| I'm able to do better things with my life | 3.46/3.53 | | |
| New opportunities are available | 3.31/3.26 | | |
| I'm more likely to try to change things | 3.54/3.68 | | |
| A feeling of self-reliance | 3.77/3.63 | | |
| Knowing I can handle difficulties | 3.54/3.47 | | |
| Being able to accept the way things work out | 3.69/3.79 | | |
| I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought | 3.46/3.63 | | |
| A better understanding of spiritual matters. | 2.42/3.68* | -2.343 | -0.192 |
| I have a stronger religious faith | 2.62/3.74 | | |
| My priorities about what is important in life | 3.46/3.63 | | |
| An appreciation for the value of my own life | 3.08/4.05* | -1.733 | -0.218 |
| Appreciating every day. | 3.46/4.26* | -1.472 | -0.132 |
| Mean total PTG score | 63.02/76.56 | | |

Two-tailed p value: **p<.01, *p<.05