

Rags to Riches: Positive Psychological Attributes and Spiritual Factors Creating Meaning

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In mainstream media, the common perception is that “rags to riches” stories only consist of becoming “rich and famous”. This paper aims to reflect on the phenomenological experiences of 19 South Africans who significantly were able to move beyond their own significant low point experiences (imaginary: “rags”) into high point experiences (imaginary: “riches”). The presence of a meaningful experience indicates a turning point divide between low and high. Having the right positive psychological attributes supports the change required to move beyond your circumstances. The study explored the deeper internal psychological attributes within a person along with spiritual factors that could affect change in a person’s life to have an improved and fulfilling life. An existential-phenomenological-humanistic approach, from a positive psychological theoretical viewpoint, was used. The attributes were identified as themes through thematic analysis. The study found that meaning was the most prevalent feature in all respondents’ lives to indicate a turn away from, sometimes intense, negative experiences. The presence of a positive mind-set (including positive attitude, self-thought, and self-talk) played a dominant role in affecting change, while the presence of faith and religious belief indicated the spiritual factors associated with change.

Keywords: change, life experience, meaning, positive psychology, psychological attributes, spiritual

A study conducted in South Africa during 2014-2015 revealed a theme-model based on the investigation of the psychological and spiritual attributes present within a so-called “rags-to-riches” experience. “Rags-to-riches” is commonly used in main stream media as an adage to describe a situation of being generally poor and unknown where after, usually within a relatively limited time period, one is able to become rich and famous. In relation to the study, similar experiences of 19 ordinary South African participants’ were explored. The concept of “rags-to-riches” symbolized significant psychological or spiritual low points or “rags”-experiences, which participants were able to manage and transcend or move away from, to reach significant high points or “riches”-experiences. The phenomenon of being able to overcome very low state-of-life experiences seemed very interesting and worth studying scientifically.

From a positive psychological point of view, the researcher set off to investigate South African citizens’ experiences of being challenged psychologically and spiritually with their own negative circumstances and situations. He was interested in the dynamics underlying the occurrence of the phenomenon of being able to transcend personal low points; being able to change negative low point experiences, due to negative circumstances, into positive high point experiences. The question therefore arose: What would the

psychological and/or spiritual attributes be within an individual's self-perceived significant negative life experience due to negative circumstances, to enable him or her to change such an experience into a self-perceived significant positive and meaningful life experience?

A Positive Mind-Set

Studies have indicated that having a positive mind-set has a positive effect on various aspects of human functioning and makes one's life more meaningful. Weurlander, Masiello, Söderberg, and Wernerson (2009) showed that students' positive perceptions on new ways of learning enhanced their motivation and ultimately contributed meaningfully to their learning experience. Having a positive attitude and outlook on life not only enhances one's learning experience but also life experience in general (Kabir, 2013), such as, with regards to close relationships (Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006) and collaboration (Wang, Chang, & Lai, 2012). Positive perception is a contributing factor to employee job-satisfaction (Abdullah & Lee, 2012). Positive perceptions and optimism have been found to contribute positively to life-satisfaction (Alarcon, Bowling, & Khazon, 2013; Bailey, Eng, Frisch, & Snyder, 2007). Mental toughness, positive attitude, optimism, and high self-confidence are internal psychological characteristics of peak performing athletes (Krane & Williams, 2006).

Optimism is defined as a "tendency to expect the best possible outcome and to dwell on positive aspects of situations" (Matsumoto, 2009, p. 351). Resilience is "the ability to adapt successfully to even very difficult circumstances" (Hooley, Butcher, Nock, & Mineka, 2017, p. 88). Optimism and resilience were found to be positively correlated (Lopez, Pedrotti, & Snyder, 2015). A post 9/11 study indicated that more resilient victims experienced less depression (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2011). Hardiness or resilience and sense of coherence were also found to be correlated with happiness and positive affect (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Certain religious/spiritual factors, such as morality, self-control, forgiveness, and hope, were also found to be associated with resilience (Foy, Drescher, & Watson, 2011). According to Wong (2014), meaning is also essential to resilience.

The way in which the mind perceives information has also been investigated. Mindfulness can be seen as the ability to focus and maintain one's attention openly and non-reactively towards different stimuli, in an active and reflective way, while at the same time be aware of the present moment or environment in which the information is perceived (Kabat-Zin, 2007; Vallejo, 2006 both cited in Rodríguez-Ledo, Orejudo, Cardoso, Balaguer, & Zarza-Alzugaray, 2018). In their study, Rodríguez-Ledo et al. (2018) corroborated the relationship between mindfulness and emotional intelligence which in itself has been positively associated through various studies with improved life satisfaction and resiliency (Foumany & Salehi, 2015), psychological well-being (Nagahi, 2014), happiness and mental health (Sasanpour, Khodabakhshi, & Nooryan, 2012). Rumination or the unhealthy habitual tendency to think negatively can be alleviated through mindfulness (Nortje, 2020).

Various conventional psychological thought processes, such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, are generally associated with positive outcomes. According to Burton (cited by Ackerman, 2020), self-confidence is about one's trust in oneself and one's ability to "deal with challenges, solve problems, and engage successfully with the world" (p. 1). Self-confidence is essential to sport performance, and outstanding athletes have high self-confidence (Weinberg & Williams, 2006; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2006). Self-efficacy is "a belief (expectation) about how competently one will be able to enact a behaviour in a particular situation" (Friedman & Schustack, 2012, p. 240). Positive self-efficacy is therefore a positive belief

or expectation that one will be successful in one's performance. Self-esteem can be seen as the overall way one evaluates oneself (Santrock, 2015). Healthy self-esteem has been linked with being resilient in spite of challenges and disappointments (Allegiance Health, cited by Ackerman, 2020).

Sport psychologists would agree that what athletes think influences their performance. Not only what they think, but also what they say to themselves, generally refer to as an internal dialogue, or self-talk. Thoughts affect feelings and feelings affect behaviour (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2006). Negative thoughts would therefore ultimately lead to poor performance. Athletes are trained to have positive mental attitudes to enhance their performance and boost their confidence (Weinberg & Williams, 2006; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2006). The Mayo Clinic (2020) poses that positive thinking associated with optimism forms an important part of managing stress effectively, which in turn then is associated with better health. According to the clinic, positive thinking does not mean one ignores unpleasant situations, but "you approach unpleasantness in a more positive and productive way ... [y]ou think the best is going to happen" (p. 1). Various physical and psychological health benefits, including improved coping regarding stress and better well-being, are mentioned as a result of positive thinking (Mayo Clinic, 2020).

According to Mead (2020), self-talk is the

internal narrative you hold about yourself ... helps you reframe the way you look at stressful situations, understanding that you will approach challenges with the best of your ability and that whatever the outcome—you did the best you could. (p. 1)

Self-talk forms a starting point for positive thinking and therefore positive thoughts (Mayo Clinic, 2020). Positive self-talk has many advantages. It boosts one's confidence, resilience, and relationships; it can help one be more optimistic, effectively manage stress, generally be healthier and experience greater life satisfaction (Healthline, 2020; Mead, 2020). On the other hand, negative self-talk was found to be associated with higher anxiety amongst athletes, decreased performance, and lowered self-esteem which may also ultimately result in being depressed (Conroy & Metzler, 2004; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2006). Positive self-talk versus negative self-talk is an effective technique used in sport psychology to help athletes change negative thoughts into positive thoughts (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2006).

Spiritual Aspects: Faith, Religion, Meaning, and Transcendence

Existentialism emphasizes the importance of a person's subjective experience and supports the notion that a person is emerging (or changing) and cannot only transcend as a person beyond him- or herself but also above his or her (negative) circumstances (Moore, 2017). Phenomenology and humanism also support the idea of the importance of personal subjective experience: phenomenologists adding the idea that "individuals assign personal meanings to experience" (p. 331) and humanists highlighting the "actualisation of the individual's own inner potential" (p. 332) as well as seeing the individual as "an active participant in the determination of behaviour" (p. 333). From these philosophical person-orientated viewpoints flows the idea of the spiritual or higher-than-the-self dimension.

Studies on people being religious and having faith or believing in a spiritual being indicated less negative aspects regarding human health and well-being such as depression, anxiety, suicidal tendency, or substance abuse (Archer, 2017; Donahue & Benson, 1995; George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000). A majority of people find comfort in faith and religion during crisis as a means of coping and to grow and recover (James &

Gilliland, 2013). Religion is therefore a key factor in dealing with loss of others or loved ones, as well as one's own death and one of the major positive effects thereof is that it helps people make sense of death or loss and to understand it (James & Gilliland, 2013). People find inner comfort and healing through faith and within religion or spirituality.

It was found in a correlational research study that people with a religious belief lived longer than those not believing in a divine being (Ciccarelli et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies also indicated positive associations with personal and emotional well-being, personal or emotional and social life satisfaction, hope, optimism, being connected and comforted after one has felt hopeless, unsupported and disconnected, meaning and purpose, self-esteem, happiness, prosocial values and behaviour, and marital satisfaction (Archer, 2017; Efklides & Moraitou, 2013; Foy et al., 2011; Lopez et al., 2015; Saroglou, 2013).

The existential-humanistic psychologist, Victor Frankl (1959), introduced the idea that human beings are primarily seeking meaning in their lives and therefore motivated towards finding it. Our will to realize or find meaning is a primary motivational force, which is referred to as "will-to-meaning" (Frankl, 1969). Frankl also proclaimed that a uniquely human characteristic is that we are primarily spiritual beings and that, according to him, without meaning one's existence would be merely physical and psychological (Shantall, 2017). We can only enter the spiritual or meaning dimension through transcending our physical and psychological dimensions (Frankl, 1966; 1969).

Abraham Maslow (1943; 1954), who introduced the hierarchy of needs to the world, is recognized for the fundamental idea that people are mainly motivated by and driven in satisfying their needs. Maslow (1954; 1969; 1971; 1999) first proposed that the ultimate need requiring satisfaction was the need to be self-actualized, which meant a person is motivated to realize his or her full potential and be or become the ultimate person he or she can be. Maslow later on expanded his theory to include the need for transcendence at the highest level of the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1971). In Maslow's (1971) own words, transcendence refers to "the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos" (p. 269). Transcendence, according to Koltko-Rivera (2006) in a reflection on Maslow's later work, includes putting one's own needs aside for a greater good such as serving others.

Our ability as spiritual beings, therefore it seems, includes our will to move beyond our (negative) physical and psychological dimensions of experience and self-transcend towards realizing or having meaningful experiences in our lives.

Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted between July 2014 and March 2015 to investigate the phenomenon of rags to riches or success stories in a sense of describing personal experiences to move from a significant low point towards a significant high point, providing an indication of what happens during such a turning point experience. In this South African study, data was collected from 19 participants across various provinces of the country. Sampling was non-random, convenient, but purposive. Through work colleagues and friends, potential participants were identified to either be approached through a gatekeeper organization or directly. In the end, a diverse group of South African citizens participated, ranging between the ages of 18 and 67 (average age = 30.8), and consisting of males (10) and females (9), from the African (7), White (6), and Coloured (6) ethnic race groups. 12 of the total 19 participants were avid sportspersons, while seven were not. The total group's job

status ranged from: being a pensioner (1), being employed by an employer (8), having an own business or being self-employed (2), being a scholar or student (6), and being unemployed (2).

Procedures

In preparation for data collection, certain communication documents were drafted, research instruments constructed and finalized, and research participants identified and recruited. The instruments used for each participant in the study consisted of a River of Life (RoL) drawing, an interviewing recording and transcript—utilized as the main research instrument, a Short Background Information Questionnaire (SBIQ), and researcher notes and other sources (e.g., background) information. Once identified, participants were presented general communication about the study and informed about their rights in respect of participation where after informed consent forms were signed. Contact sessions were held with each participant to obtain research data. The first part of the contact session involved the creation of each participant's River of Life drawing, where after interviews took place, which were recorded. The River of Life drawing is a drawing, generally in the form of a river with a beginning and an end, simulating the participant's life sequence or timeline. It was requested that participants should at least indicate a beginning (i.e., their birth), their low point(s), their high point(s), and an end (i.e., projected end of their life). They were prompt to provide dates and also to make notes thereon and sign it with their pseudo-names. All participants were provided the researcher own River of Life drawing in the form of a computer generated sketch, as an example.

At the start of the interview, each participant was asked the same open research question (i.e., it was read exactly as it was typed). Thereafter, in a response to answer it, they told their stories. The question was:

In your own words, can you please describe your significant—which can mean noteworthy or important—low point in your life along with the significant high point in life experienced and the aspects that you thought, felt, said, did and/or believed to move you from or past the low to the high point?

Responses to the question were provided as short life stories, which were recorded for later transcription. Interviews ranged between 15 and 60 minutes. Additional information was obtained through observation and field notes during the RoL drawings and interviews, along with responses to short quantitative questions contained in the SBIQ-questionnaire, obtained directly after the interviews. Data analysis followed the data collection and was performed on the information received.

Ethics

Ethical clearance for the study was provided by the Department of Psychology, University of South Africa (UNISA). Ethical standards, as laid down by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) in the *Guidelines on Ethical Rules*, as well as within UNISA's *Policy on Research Ethics*, were adhered to at all times. All participants were adults and voluntarily agreed to participate in signing an informed consent form stipulating their rights, possible benefits to them or the society regarding their participation, any possible harm as well as provisioning of professional support they should require so. Confidentiality or the protection of the identity of participants was further achieved by using pseudonyms instead of participants' real names. Some preferred using their real names, but in the end, the researcher used pseudonyms for all participants.

Data was treated by adhering to the strict rules of confidentiality, and in accordance to the ethical principles of autonomy and non-maleficence, in order to ensure the participants were protected and no harm would come to them. To ensure further non-maleficence to participants, since it was foreseen that some of the

low point experiences could be hurtful if re-experienced during the re-telling of their stories, the researcher was highly sensitive and attentive towards participants to avoid harmful negative experiences to surface and be re-lived. If any sign thereof were to present itself, the researcher would stop the research process in an attempt to avoid the situation of a participant re-living the hurtful experience. Furthermore, the researcher would allow all participants to freely respond to the question asked and offered assistance in case professional help was required, prior to interviews and as indicated within the informed consent form. Ultimately, no indication of any participants being adversely affected and directly or indirectly harmed by participating in the study was observed or detected.

Data Analysis

Individual interviewing was the main method of data collection. The interview data was transcribed by a qualified transcriber and quality checking was done by the researcher. The transcribed stories, as unit of analysis, were then analyzed. The main technique used for analysing the data was the thematic analysis technique (Kawulich & Holland, 2012). Coding, categorization, and theme identification was performed. Computer software programs were utilised to assist in analysing the data. Various sources of data were used to complete the analysis process.

During the final phase of analysis, contextualising and interpretation to enhance understanding of the experiences of participants took place, and from the presented themes of the total group of participants emerged an integrated theme-model.

Results and Discussion

Thematic Analysis of Participant Stories

Participants verbalised their experiences through their stories during the interviews and also provided visual representations of their stories through their own unique RoL drawings. These drawings contained additional textual data which was taken into consideration with the analysis of the main textual data (i.e., the transcribed interviews), mainly for contextual interpretation and understanding. Other sources of textual data, also used for improved understanding, included researcher observation and field notes, personal reflections, SBIQ responses as background information, and any additional relevant written or verbal information obtained from gatekeepers, from participant contacts, or obtained from reviewed literature as well as known rags-to-riches background stories.

The information obtained from the various sources was integrated to enrich interview data, and contextualise participant responses. To assist in the integration of information, triangulation between interview information and other sources, such as the background stories and the researcher's reflections, observations, and comments during data collection as well as reviewed literature, took place.

During the first round of analysis, the researcher immersed himself into each individual's transcribed story or "text" to familiarize himself with the data by considering the story of each participant, his or her background, the low point experience, the high point experience, as well as the turning point experience. This process involved reading and re-reading of the stories. Colour coding was used to indicate the low, high, and turning point experiences. Codes, categories, and then themes were assigned for each participant's transcript separately from others.

During the second round of analysis, individual participant's emerged themes were then compared with

other participants' themes to identify main (common/shared) and unique (individual) themes. Saturation was reached in terms of common themes being adequately repeated while there remained some unique themes, which were not repeated.

Pre-existing themes or concepts existing in literature, background stories, and the other sources of information, mentioned before to assist in the finalisation of the themes, were considered and incorporated through integration as well as triangulation of the information.

An Integrated Theme-Model

In the final analysis of participant responses, 12 themes remained, whereof six themes were *main* themes and six themes were *unique* themes. Through integration of secondary other sources information and by combining familiar identified themes with each other, a theme-model was constructed (see Table 1). The model contains main themes, indicated by a number (1-6), which were present in all or almost all of the participants' stories, while the unique themes, indicated by a letter (A-F), were present in only some of the participants' stories. Data saturation applied to the main themes but not to the unique themes. Unique themes from the model function as supporting themes to the main themes.

Main Theme 6 (i.e., *meaning*) was present in all of the participants' stories. This theme, although it emerged within the turning point experience, differed from the other five main themes in as far as this theme was strongly associated with growth, achievement, and fulfillment, thereby connecting it more strongly to the high point experiences than the others. This connection to the high point thus presupposes that when meaning is obtained within the turning point experience, the end of the low point along with the beginning of the highpoint is reached.

Table 1

Theme-Model Indicating the Main and Unique (Sub-) Themes

Number	Main theme	Letter	Unique theme
1	Minding oneself/introspection (Awareness, realisation, acceptance, deciding, taking responsibility)		
		A	Identity and independence
2	Specific positive attributes of oneself (Self-thought, self-talk, attitude)		
		B	Humour, fun, happy-go-lucky
		C	Positive emotions (passion and control over negative emotions, e.g., anger, hurt, disappointment, loss)
		D	Positively future-orientated (dreams and goal-orientated)
		E	Drive (motivation, perseverance, challenge/competing)
3	Support (from and to)		
4	Acting or creating (doing something)		
5	Spiritual: Faith, religion (God)		
		F	Virtues (hope, forgiveness, appreciation, honesty, patience, humbleness)
6	Meaning (personal and spiritual growth, achievement, fulfilment, wisdom, value)		

Examples of Participant Responses

Examples of participant responses in support of the different themes are provided below.

Theme 1: Minding oneself/introspection (awareness, realisation, acceptance, deciding, taking responsibility)

MJ: "I've got to start looking within me ... instead of looking outwards, start looking inwards at yourself and what you can do to make yourself better and how you can start moving forward ... it's only you that can fix this and it's only you that can get better. And it's only you that can make a difference from this. Nobody else ... we can't afford to lose any one of us. And it's something that I've been carrying to say encouraging my brother to ... continue ... with school".

Theme A: Identity and independence

Limna: "We grew up in that environment, we don't have father, we don't have mother, but at least we know she is trying to come for us ... So, you look at people in the area and see how lucky are they, they have the radio. Even the radio, we didn't have money to buy, it was a luxury to us. That's why ... I will be able to sustain my family and get everything that we wanted when we grow up ... I'm more independent. I'm on my own. It's where now I show my skills ... I'm a specialist, I plan ... I've got my own house ... big house and I'm planning to do more things for me in life".

Theme 2: Specific positive attributes of oneself (self-thought, self-talk, attitude)

Trish: "I didn't wait for someone to tell me this is the way to change. No. I just thought let me find something or do something which will assist me and my family ... Be patient ... persevere, because something will come out... I had it from the beginning because I keep on telling myself I'll be patient, but I'll do something slowly but sure[ly] ... while I persevere something will be done ... they say patience and perseverance, it works".

Theme B: Humour, fun, happy-go-lucky

Noel: "I have coped with my accident and everything quite effectively ... I'm a happy-go-lucky person ... I try to make a joke about everything".

Theme C: Positive emotions (passion and control over negative emotions e.g. anger, hurt, disappointment, loss)

Jack Lime: "... it wasn't that moment now, it will happen again. And *ja*, I just from there ... flipped all the negative emotions and all the bad thoughts. I flipped them into positive ones. Released all that negative vibes and I just ... refocused on what was important at the time, which was my finals. Managed to get through".

Theme D: Positively future-orientated (dreams and goal-orientated)

Guy: "My strength is ... setting my mind on something, then I'll do it full-out ... I've placed my trust in that and remained strong ... I'm dedicated ... I'm very goal-driven".

Theme E: Drive (motivation, perseverance, challenge/competing)

Chad: "... but there was this thing inside of me that said, 'I want to see myself doing something different from what they did to us'. That is what pushed me ... what I went through this and I'm not going to repeat that. I don't want it to happen to my kids ... there was this thing inside of me that said, 'you know what, let me push-push school'".

Theme 3: Support (from and to)

M: "... I was around people that made me happy ... a lot of that support came from my husband".

Simone: "... so I started [*unclear*] like to be ... [*unclear*] because I'm the elder sister, I just [*helped out*] my parents and stuff ... But at that point things started getting better".

Theme 4: Acting or creating (doing something)

Trish: "I didn't wait for someone to tell me this is the way to change. No. I just thought let me find something or do something which will assist me and my family ... Be patient and do something".

Theme 5: Spiritual: Faith, religion (God)

Razz: "... but what inspired me was my mom's belief, my mom's... faith. My father was a pastor, so, I was brought up in a church environment. So ... I had faith that the Lord has something better. If he closes a door, he opens a [*unclear*] [*door*] ... that kind of stuff. As clichéd as it sounds, I do believe in it. That's my faith".

Theme F: Virtues (hope, forgiveness, appreciation, honesty, patience, humbleness)

Trish: "I always hope[d] or I always believe[d] in that if you're down you'll never be down forever".

Razz: "I'd say not a matter of saying something, not a matter of feeling something, but a matter of just being honest to myself. First, be honest to yourself, knowing what I need to do, knowing where I am, then that's when change started".

Theme 6: Meaning (personal and spiritual growth, achievement, fulfilment, wisdom, value)

Hazel: "My life is changing compared to the last time".

Hulk: "In the meantime I am carrying on with my life ... I am very happy ... I'm freer to move around ... You do not want to have another person's discomforts, rather have your own ... you did not lose ... you actually win all the way. Just there I stopped being sad [translated]".

Jack Lime: "It's just like you have extra energy ... you have some motivation for every day. And I think ... that's something ... that if you have that and you're riding on that, it makes life better. It makes your interactions with people much ... much better ... it just makes you ... enjoy life and value life more ... I'm currently in the moment".

Creating a Meaningful Experience

From the themes identified within the theme-model, the positive psychological attributes of positive attitude, self-thought, and self-talk were dominant in participants' turning point experiences and in ultimately providing them a meaningful experience. Despite being from a very poor background, Trish's positivity was apparent through her testimony. Even from situations of relationship break-up, passing away of a loved one, parents being divorced, being disabled, having to come back from previous sport success, and having experienced many setbacks and life difficulties, the positive internal attributes were noteworthy in the participants' lives.

Theme 2: Specific positive attributes of oneself (self-thought, self-talk, attitude)

Trish: "I didn't wait for someone to tell me this is the way to change. No. I just thought let me find something or do something which will assist me and my family ... Be patient ... persevere, because something will come out... I had it from the beginning because I keep on telling myself I'll be patient, but I'll do something slowly but sure[ly] ... while I persevere something will be done".

MJ: "I've got to start looking within me ... instead of looking outwards, start looking inwards at yourself and what you can do to make yourself better and how you can start moving forward ... it's only you that can fix this and it's only you that can get better. And it's only you that can make a difference from this. Nobody else ... we can't afford to lose any one of us. And it's something that I've been carrying to say encouraging my brother to ... continue ... with school".

Gert: "I'm a happy man. Not because of the accident. I'm a happy man because of what life ... the cards life dealt me. And there is nothing that I could have done anything different ... it's the run of my life. And I'm very content with what it is. That's it".

Noel: "Well, I am a very positive guy, I always try to see the lighter side of a situation".

Guy: "My mother raised me to be very positive ... I always saw that I was different from others ... like in sports, but it did not bother me. I just carried ... yes, people teased me at school, but it did not actually bother me. I just continued to

move forward ... to get to the top ... I've placed it behind me [translated]".

Jack Lime: "... it wasn't that moment now, it will happen again. And *ja*, I just from there ... flipped all the negative emotions and all the bad thoughts. I flipped them into positive ones. Released all that negative vibes and I just ... refocused on what was important at the time, which was my finals. Managed to get through".

Jack: "And then I thought that, 'I will work for a medal ... I will maybe get a medal in the [mentions sporting activity]' ... At the end of the year, I exceeded my expectations ... circumstances had the potential to cut down my dream ... then I would say, 'No, I will still go on and still persevere'. 'I must hold on, because at the end of the day, I want to go to the Paralympics'".

M: "... just this little disappointment mustn't make it as big as what it is and then I can overcome it and that I can maybe reach it again, I can get there ... And with this disappointment, it actually made me even a stronger person ... It was like, *yoh*, this is good. I love this, this is great. Being here is amazing ... And I do love it and it's something built in me. I can't stop it. It's just what I want to do all the time".

Kim2: "Every day ... [good] things happen ... I get my head up. And you know, people, [unclear] ... positive [phase/things] now. And that is good for me... There's light at the end of the tunnel".

Antie Boy: "And it's where I found that possibilities ... sport are ... much more. If we stay ... positive and looking forward and from there now, I trained there, to make me to have certain goals to achieve".

Another very prominent theme highlighted in the theme-model is the theme regarding faith and religion as spiritual factors present in the turning point experiences of participants. It was clear that many of the participants found meaning through having these factors present in their lives. Again, despite being from very poor backgrounds, or being in situations of relationship break-up, passing away of a loved one, personal danger, having to come back from previous sport success, being disabled, and having experienced various setbacks and life difficulties, having faith and being religious were noteworthy in these participants' lives to overcome them and experience meaning.

Theme 5: Spiritual: Faith, religion (God)

Trish: "I always believe[d] in that if you're down you'll never be down forever".

Hulk: "*Certainly, I spoke to our Father. I honestly opened my heart to the Lord and begged for forgiveness and approached Him for work ... I asked Him pertinently to open my eyes; to help me get rid of the pain. And as I said, the advice other people gave me ... for a better 'eye-opener' I could not ask. And that all because of our Father* [translated]".

MJ: "I would say the turning point was when, you know, as I mentioned that God has got a purpose in our lives...there's something that He wants us to do".

Gert: "So, the very low point in my life was an accident that could not be prevented or could not be foretold ... it was just part of the will of God".

Kim: "I just prayed every night...if I arrive safely at home, then I will forgive that man everything he did to me".

Kim2: "I've changed dramatically ... I got closer to God".

Jack: "So, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour ... and I believe that is the thing ... that fed my life to where it is now".

Jack Lime: "I found myself more of the time having conversations with God than with anybody else and I think it was His peace really, that just came over my life ... I think God's bigger picture came into forehand ... I just continued playing [mentions his sport] knowing that, when it was God's time, He would bring the right opportunity with the right people involved and everything ... it just showed me that no matter how much you want to force something if it's not God's time, then it's not going to be useful either. So ... from that low point ... I overcame a lot of things and then I managed to get to a new high".

Razz: "... but what inspired me was my mom's belief, my mom's... faith. My father was a pastor, so, I was brought up in a church environment. So ... I had faith that the Lord has something better. If he closes a door, he opens a [unclear] [door] ... that kind of stuff. As clichéd as it sounds, I do believe in it. That's my faith"

Simone: "There is a way in life, there's new beginnings to everything. You don't have to worry about the past anymore ... it's wonderful ... it's all about God, every day ... my strong belief. Like God, he will make a way no matter what".

The participants in the study all indicated that they have reached their own significant high points. High points differed from participant to participant and included being successful in sport such as receiving sport awards and accolades, being selected for a provincial or national team, or participating in an international competition. Other high points included reconciliation or amendment of past broken-relationships, finding employment, obtaining a qualification, having financial success or being financially stable. But what was significant to the researcher from the findings of the study is that all the participants indicated they experienced meaning within their turning point experiences. The meaning they experienced included being content and or happy with their life circumstances, having improved interpersonal relationships, value and/or a renewed outlook on life, experiencing personal and spiritual growth, being self-fulfilled, wiser and/or able to cope with or overcome hurt, disability, setbacks and challenges, achieving in sport or on a personal level, and being loved or caring for and being committed to another. This study conducted amongst South African citizens, from diverse negative circumstances, therefore indicated that certain positive psychological internal attributes along with specific spiritual factors contributed towards an individual's ability to experience transcendence from his or her own significant low point to a significant high point. In finding meaning within such a turning point experience one can conclude that the individual has been able to successfully affect or create this change.

Conclusion

It is indicated that there are various psychological attributes as well as spiritual factors present in and influencing one's personal experience to move beyond a low point to a high point. Internal positive psychological attributes, such as positive attitude, self-thought, and self-talk, help one to affect change in one's own life. Furthermore, having faith and being religious contributes to the same effect. In combination, these attributes and factors provide a solid foundation for having a meaningful life experience despite adverse negative circumstances and negative life experiences. This paper specifically highlighted the internal and spiritual aspects in relation to meaning as part of change. The theme-model presented in this article can be helpful in providing clues to individuals in similar circumstances on what to do to change their negative life experiences into positive and meaningful ones. It is recommended that further studies take place to explore and verify the application of the model presented.

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