

Fighting for a future: the potential for posttraumatic growth among youths formerly associated with armed forces in Northern Uganda

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This article presents the potential of posttraumatic growth (PTG) among youths formerly associated with the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda. Through investigating life narratives of 12 such youths, this study aims to discover the potential of PTG as a consequence of a forced time period with the LRA. By means of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the narratives revealed four themes: social support; participation; self perception, and faith in God. These four themes are found to resemble four of the five factors measuring PTG. Basic values and cultural understanding, however, makes the possibility of PTG very doubtful. Yet, a matching review of the four themes and PTG compose a foundation of how to focus future interventions, with an increased potential for growth, among youths formerly associated with the LRA.

Keywords: armed conflict, children, Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA), Lords Resistance Army (LRA), Northern Uganda, posttraumatic growth (PTG), psychosocial support, war, youth

Introduction

Over the last decade more than 40 million children have been affected by armed conflicts worldwide (Singer, 2006). Children and youths in armed conflict areas are deprived of opportunities considered

essential for their development and general wellbeing, including a lack of economic, educational, health and social opportunities. It has also been shown that these situations can be highly stressful and possibly traumatic (Boyden & de Berry, 2004). Youths are often considered more vulnerable to traumatic stress than adults as they have fewer resources, lack mature coping skills, and are still in the process of developing a sense of self (Aldwin & Sutton, 1998; Williams, 2007). However, a large amount of the research into childhood resilience implies children do have the ability to navigate horrible traumas (Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006).

Studies suggest that a wide range of psychosocial factors play a significant part in the wellbeing of youths formerly associated with armed forces, e.g. their degree of resilience (Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Boyden & de Berry, 2004), educational possibilities (Sørensen, 2007), family connectedness, community acceptance, and peer relations (Blattman & Annan, 2007; Barber, 2001; Betancourt et al., 2005; Verhey, 2001).

Children are not only affected indirectly by armed conflicts, some participate actively. An approximate 300.000 children are associated with armed forces¹ around the world (Wessells, 2006). This problem is most critical in Africa, where one-third of these children

are located, and children as young as nine are abducted to serve the various armies (Troyer, 2005). Since the beginning of the 1970's Uganda has been affected by armed conflict. The war ended in Southern Uganda in 1985, but has continued with undiminished strength in Northern Uganda for a further 20 years.

Children and armed conflict in Northern Uganda

The LRA has abducted more than 20,000 children. An estimated 25% of all abducted children were girls (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). The average age of those abducted was between 12 and 13, and they typically stayed with the armed forces for a period of two years. (Blattman & Annan, 2007). Thirty six percent of the children reported having killed one or more persons (Bayer et al., 2007), and a similar percentage among the girls have reported having been sexually abused (Derluyn et al., 2004). Today Northern Uganda enjoys relative peace, although it is believed that up to 2000 women and children remain in the Lords Resistance Army camps through force (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

Research conducted in Uganda reveals paradoxical findings. A study of 71 children formerly associated with the LRA in Northern Uganda claims, that on average, 97% of the children had clinical symptoms of posttraumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) three years and four month after returning home (Derluyn et al., 2004). However, Annan et al. (2006) has shown that association with the LRA, in itself, did not lead to a significant increase in psychological problems compared to their non abducted peers. Yet, they have found a positive correlation exists between the amount and characteristics of the exposure to violence while with the LRA, and the

following negative outcomes. Others have not been able to find any significant relationship between exposure to violence and negative psychosocial outcomes (Bayer et al., 2007).

As is the case in many other conflicts, the conflict in Northern Uganda has affected the entire society by breaking down family, social and economic structures. Additionally, large parts of the culture and the prospects of education for children and youths have been hampered (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs/IRIN, 2004). Entire communities have been held captive indirectly by the LRA, as they have been forced to leave their homes and move into Internal Displaced People's (IDP) camps to be protected by the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF).

The concept of posttraumatic growth

According to Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis (2004), at least half of those exposed to trauma of some sort experience at least one positive change afterwards that can be linked directly to the traumatic event. However, the chance of growth differs widely according to personal characteristics, patterns of trauma responses, cognitive and emotional trauma appraisals, and the socio-cultural environment (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Based on research in various areas (e.g. health, abuse and war), Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) identified five factors that capture the elements relevant for posttraumatic growth (PTG): relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. A confirmation factor analysis, including 14 studies and 926 participants (Taku et al., 2008), affirmed the validity of the five factors based on the 21-item Posttraumatic Growth Inventory

(PTGI) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). As the five factors are multidimensional, it is expected that the dimensions will relate differently to other variables, e.g. culture.

Explanatory models with different perspectives on the aetiology and process of PTG have been developed. Commonly, they view PTG as a purpose of biological, psychological, and socio-cultural influences, and consider individuals as having an intrinsic motivation toward growth. The model developed by Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) emphasises the growth process in the terms of personal characteristics, cognition and narration. They define PTG as a growth process following an event that shatters a person's assumptions about the world. Furthermore, Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) found that PTG implies a certain cognitive developmental level with an established set of schemas. Meanwhile, they suggest that younger individuals may be more open to PTG than adults because their cognitive schemas are not yet fully established. One consequence of such cognitive immaturity, plasticity and adaptive capacities is that it often veils the consequences of war (Shaw & Harris, 2003).

The PTG concept has been validated primarily with American adults, and to date, no research validating the PTG in an Ugandan context has been found. Therefore, to strengthen the knowledge of the universality of PTG, research exploring the aetiology and impact of PTG within a broader population is needed.

Goals

A few studies have explored the existence of PTG among youths exposed to traumatic events (Kilmer, 2006). None of these, however, provide information on PTG in children and youths formerly associated with armed forces. The existant PTG

literature (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006) does, however, lead to the assumption that traumatic experiences gained while associated with the armed forces could also provide a unique opportunity for growth.

The study was conducted among these youths in Northern Uganda with the goal of exploring the presence of the five factors of PTG in the youths' narratives. These findings will help qualify future interventions aimed at supporting PTG among youths formerly associated with armed forces in Northern Uganda.

Method

In February 2009, 12 youths formerly associated with the LRA in Northern Uganda participated in semi-structured interviews inspired by the elements defining PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Therefore, the questions were constructed according to the five factors of the PTG in order to explore opportunities and resources. For example, to explore the possibilities for the personal strength factor, the questions were; *'what did you do to survive while with the LRA?'* and *'how do you think you were able to escape the LRA?'* Furthermore, to explore the signs of shattered assumptions about the world, all participants were asked about their perception of their world before, during, and after their time with LRA. For all three periods the following questions were asked; *'what was important to you?'* and *'how do you think that it is important to you?'*

The study was conducted as a requirement of the Uganda Red Cross Society. The authors conducted the interviews in an environment familiar to the participants, offering confidentiality and privacy. A local psychosocial officer from the Uganda Red Cross Society (URCS), not previously known to the youths, translated between English and the local language (Luo or Acholi).

The study was designed and conducted within the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA allows for exploration of subjective experiences. It also promotes comprehension of the participants' accounts, by which they make sense of their own experiences.

Interviews

The 12 semi-structured interviews were designed as broad, open ended questions aimed at eliciting each individual story. Based on the *American Psychological Association's Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Subjects*, a clear and fair agreement was established with each participant prior to his or her participation. To ensure anonymity, the names of the participants were changed. Each participant was interviewed once and invited to contact the URCS psychosocial officer for a follow up visit.

Each interview began with this opening line; *'I'd like to start by asking you to tell me about yourself, and what is important to you.'* The interviews lasted an average of 1¹/₂ hours and were tape recorded for later transcription.

To qualify, according to the IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2004), the data collection first level analysis was routinely conducted after each interview. Important elements from each interview were highlighted. Second level analysis was conducted after every two interviews, identifying crosscutting themes. These themes were combined into new crosscutting themes, in the light of all prior themes, and used to certify the following interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2004). All 12 interviews were analysed to uncover any general cross themes relevant to PTG.

Participants

Criteria for participation in the study included at least one month spent with the

LRA to ensure that the participants had experienced the routines of life within the LRA. Furthermore, to also ensure that the results of the study reflected more than simply short term effects, the participants have had to be out of the LRA for at least three years or more prior to the interview. The age range of the participants was 15–24, with a median age of 18. This criterion was chosen to support homogeneity in the participants.

Gender balance was 50/50. Time spent with the LRA ranged from one month to six years, with a median of 24 months. Four youths escaped, seven were rescued by the UPDF and for one participant, it is unknown how they left.

At the time of the interviews, five of the 12 participants were attending school, while the remaining seven had never returned to school upon their return home (due to lack of money). Ten of the 12 participants had lost their fathers, and three of the participants had also lost their mothers.

Findings

The participants' narratives contained stories of their experiences from the war;

'what we were doing was killing and stealing things and they were all along beating me with a bayonet and a stick, and the wounds are there, you can see them [...] If you are on your own you do not do those things, but because you are forced you do it, but on your own you would not do those things. You cannot do it on your own' (Jackson).

Despite their grim experiences while with the LRA the participants shared a strong wish for a normal life and expressed hope and ideas for how to create a better future;

'If the government could accept and negotiate, the children could come home and there could be peace [...] The government should let the children come back so they get a future and a better life, the children do no good in the bush and the government should stop the fight. It is education that can help your life' (Henry).

Using the IPA, four general themes were found to be important aspects of the youths' general wellbeing: social support; participation; self perception; and faith in God. Table 1 presents and documents findings. The themes have been identified according to the importance within the interviews and contains both developing and limiting elements. The fifth PTGI domain, *'appreciation of life'* did not appear in the narratives, and no related theme could be extracted from them.

Discussion

The four identified themes are a condensation of what was particularly important to those interviewed. All themes were positively connoted. The elements creating the themes, though, are *not* a result of the youths' time spent with the LRA. The narratives revealed two reasons for this: firstly, none of the participants believed that anything good could come out of something as negative as staying with the LRA; *'I didn't see anything good in there'* (Christian). As the youths solely regarded their time with the LRA in a negative light, personal change stemming from this period was perceived as undesirable. Moreover, believing in growth subsequent to the time with the LRA would only support some people's prejudices about the youths returning with a changed set of values. Secondly, in Uganda, there is no tradition of talking about traumatic and stigmatised experiences. Not talk-

ing about the past and not believing in good things coming from bad things challenges the possibility of growth.

Even though no PTG was found to be present in the youths of this study, this article finds two reasons for the discussion to continue. By holding up the four themes against the four resembling factors from the PTG, knowledge about what interventions support growth after being with the LRA will be revealed. This can be used in post war areas such as Northern Uganda, but also as a strategy for supporting the possibility of PTG among children who are currently fighting in wars in other parts of the world. In the following section, the four identified themes will be discussed in relation to the four PTG factors they resemble:

- Theme: Social support » Factor: Relating to others;
- Theme: Participation » Factor: New possibilities;
- Theme: Perception of self » Factor: Personal strength;
- Theme: Faith in God » Factor: Spiritual change.

Theme: social support

The importance of social support became evident through the participants emphasis on a caring family, close friends and an approachable community. In many of the narratives, the participants valued close relations to others, put a lot effort into their relationships and strived for acceptance. The youths' emphasis on these elements is significant for their potential of developing PTG. The PTGI factor *'relating to others'* is among others, concerned with a better acceptance of needing others, of putting more effort into relationships and feeling a greater sense of closeness to others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This study found that

Table 1.

Theme	Characteristics	Appearance	Quote
Social support	Caring family Close friends Approachable and accepting community	The participants emphasised that positive reintegration was a product of a caring family, that was missed while in captivity, an approachable community upon return and close friends. However, negative outcomes of social relations were common due to stigmatisation.	[...] <i>Immediately after coming back I went to town and stayed there for one year [...] My mother used to say, that if I went out people would start asking me about what had happened in the bush. Then I would rather stay at home and I could calm down. And then begin to go</i> (Kate) <i>In the past they used to like me because I had parents. Now people don't like me because I don't have parents</i> (Esther) <i>When I'm alone it gives me time to think, but when I'm with friends we share, we talk, we joke, and it makes me forget</i> (Esther) <i>Actually in the bush you might have killed, and the spirit of the bush and of the dead people might be in you and when you step on the eggs you are cleaned</i> [...] <i>To me it was a sign of welcome</i> (Henry) <i>It is good to be able to do like others because it helps me to see ideas</i> (Christian) <i>School is the way, it open the way for you. You need to study</i> (Andrew) <i>Q: How is the future of Uganda in your eyes? A: It is there but it is not bright. Q: How can we make it bright? A: We should increase the level of education and then corruption should stop</i> (Francis)
Participation	Be like others Equal opportunities for participation Education	The narrations revealed a conflict between a strong wish to accomplish ones future dreams and the perception of having deficient conditions. This conflict was further articulated through the participants' experience of their peers as having more opportunities for fulfilling future dreams. Education and community acceptance were seen as the road to a bright future.	<i>These people call themselves holy so before going to bed we prayed and before doing anything in the morning we prayed. Q: Do you consider the rebels holy? A: No they are killing many people</i> (Andrew) <i>All in all what we were doing was killing and stealing things (...) If you are on your own you do not do those things, but because you are forced you do it</i> (Jackson) <i>Q: What gave you the way to escape? A: I don't know but it could be the plan of God. Q: What else could it have been? A: It could have been an accident. Q: Could it have been something in you that was the reason why you were able to escape, like strength or courage? A: No, because when we entered the ambush I was shot and broke my legs</i> (Immanuel)
Perception of oneself	Upholding core values Externalising personal accomplishments	The majority of the participants upheld core values by dissociating themselves from acts forced upon them by the LRA. All actions and personal achievements, negative as well as positive, were typically externalised.	<i>It was God who helped me because he knew how I was abducted and he has been helping me. I prayed that God should help me to make my life continue</i> (Henry) <i>If I had been alone I would not have succeeded. It was God's will</i> (Christian)
Faith in God	Explain and create meaning as a consequence of the will of God	All narratives emphasised praying and attributed positive consequences to God. The participants were likely to find strength through their faith in God.	

although the youths put a lot of effort into all of their social relations, they experienced disparities in their potential for acceptance and closeness in relationships with parents, friends and community.

Family appeared to play a protective role in the lives of the returning youth and was seen as the people to count on in times of trouble;

'my father said when you have been abducted, if you remain there in the camp and they come back they will keep on abducting you [...] Immediately after coming back I went to town and stayed there for one year' (Kate).

Although support from parents was neither given, nor self-evident, it was essential for the youths' interaction with others;

'in the past they used to like me because I had parents. Now people don't like me because I don't have parents' (Esther).

The importance of family is supported by Corbin's (2008) study of 10 children formerly associated with the LRA. She found that family provides the psycho-emotional foundation necessary to develop relationships with others and to protect children from harassment and (potential) community fear. This acceptance of needing others and the ability to count on others expressed by the youth in this study are central elements for developing PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (1995), receiving support from people who share similar traumatic experiences also seems to be important for the potential of growth. This study found that friends made during the time spent with the LRA typically allowed for more openness regarding past experiences;

'the friends there [from the bush], no matter how bitter it is, they do not take it seriously and they share theirs [experiences] and you feel relieved. But the friends here, when you say bitter things, they begin to sympathise and you feel the pain inside instead, and you feel like you want to leave' (Dorothy).

Participation in this group allow participants to express otherwise stigmatising emotions. The willingness to express emotions is central for the factor relating to others in the PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). On the other hand, friends from the local community help the youths to deal with their past by creating opportunities for distancing the past;

'good friends come to tell me to stay well, don't slip and don't do as you did in the bush, because

you were forced, be calm and don't think about other things' (Jackson).

The support received, despite the past in the bush, reveals closeness in the youths' peer relations. Studies have shown, that youths who perceive friends as supportive, experience fewer psychological challenges, have more confidence in peer acceptance and feel less lonely (Eccles, Templeton, Barber & Stone, 2003). Closeness with others is another key issue for the factor relating to others in the PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

The participants in this study feared sharing their experiences with people from the community because of the risk of being pointed out and exclusion. They felt that the audience of their stories of the past were prejudiced;

'my parents said I shouldn't tell anybody [...] because they thought that if I told others then others at school may start to insult me' (Kate).

Therefore, not talking about the past is not a choice made (solely) by the youths, but an expected way of managing the past. War survivors from South West Uganda explicate similar experiences by arguing that talking about the past can lead to negative consequences like isolation (Tankink, 2004). Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) highlight self-disclosure in the process of PTG. The present study indicates that not talking about the past was often used as a strategy to ensure having relationships outside of family and friends. Still, the participants were aware that they might have to put more effort than others into their communal relationships in order to be reintegrated into the community;

'sometimes I help because I don't want people to say that I'm bad' (Immanuel).

A Philippine study of girls formerly associated with armed forces found that the wish to contribute was linked to a wish to make up for the harm they had done while with the armed forces (Keairns, 2003). The desire for putting more effort into developing positive relations is a central point in the factor relating to others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Participation was found to be important as all the youths stressed the constrained potential to become participating members of their communities, lack of education and a need to be more like their peers;

‘if I have had the means, I would have tried to follow my classmates in school. Some of my friends have finished university’ (Christian).

Lewis-Charp et al. (2003) found that youths benefit developmentally from participating in collective activities that set aside personal interests. As proven in studies of adult survivors of traumatic experiences, the ability to act and have influence on one’s own situation seems to have an impact on the development of PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006).

Despite dominating constraints, the narratives in this study also revealed hope and dreams for the future, with school and education being perceived as essential. All the youths in the study spoke of school and education as an investment in the future, and a way to establish one’s life path;

‘it [school] is the future of the nation [...] Those leaders that are there now, they will not stay forever, so you have to go to school so that you can replace them’ (Francis).

According to a study by Evans & Prilleltensky (2005), school is an arena where children and youths can develop mastery and a sense of control. The ability to change

things that need to be changed is a key issue to experiencing ‘*new possibilities*’ in life.

Additionally, the youths perceived education as a mean through which they would be able to do better things with their life and establish a new path; from a position as a person in the LRA, to an equally participating community member. Attending school helps children and youths explore their personal potential, develop new interests and offers them a knowledge based confidence (Sørensen, 2007). They learn how to follow the community’s rules and may experience a sense of belonging among their peers (Wedge, 2008). Skills and knowledge are often considered important resources when reestablishing meaning in life, and establishing a sense of normality, which has been proven important for the protection of children in times of adversity (Wedge, 2008). Therefore, school fosters children and youth to take action and recognise new opportunities, which is important for developing PTG.

Self perception The participants’ perception of self appeared in narrations about i) personal accomplishments and ii) the ability to uphold core values despite forced actions violating these, as well as the communities expectations of a changed set of values. In the factor ‘*personal strength*’, internal attribution is highlighted and characterised by one’s own ability to handle difficulties, to feel strong and be self reliant, among others.

In this study, participants typically attributed any change or cause for success to something outside themselves, e.g.: God, other people or coincidences;

‘Q: So was it God who gave you the way to escape? A: I don’t know but it could be the plan of God. Q: What else could it have been? A: It could have been an accident. Q: Could it have been something in you that was the reason why you were able to escape, like strength or

courage? A: No, because when we entered the ambush I was shot and broke my legs' (Immanuel).

Studies of war and development show that taking action (Punamäki, 2006) is a significant factor in a subsequent positive rehabilitation from trauma. Additionally, Livanou et al. (2002) found that attributing change to personal effort seemed to generate more growth than changes attributed externally. Furthermore, the youths in this study revealed that they were often forced to perform acts while with the LRA contradictory to their values;

'when it was my turn I started crying and I refused to beat. Then I was told that if you refuse you must lie down and we will kill you. Then I beat him. I hit the head of the man and he died' (Kate).

According to Thoits (2003), distress occurs when an individual is unable to maintain the identity standard (what one *should* do) with the actual behaviour (what one actually *does*). Some of the participants coped with the discrepancy between their values and the forced actions by distancing themselves from these actions.

Most of the youths in this study experienced their identities by becoming a product of a past they themselves did not identify with, because the community did not expect the participants to uphold their core values (from before their time in the LRA) upon return home. In order for participant to experience growth they must be in the position where they feel they can act and discover that they are stronger than they thought they were (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006).

Faith in God was found to be important, as the youths in this study were likely to explain

and create meaning as a consequence of the will of God. Faith in God and the concept of PTG share the idea that suffering and struggle are parts of the believer's road to greater insight in life (Calhoun et al., 2000). Turning to God in times of unexplainable and continuing suffering seemingly helped the youths in this study to generate narratives that made the cruel reality of war easier to bear;

'if I had been alone I would not have succeeded. It was God's will' (Christian).

Empirical studies suggest that faith offers an important source of support and empowerment in adversity, fosters life-changing transformations of goals and priorities, and plays a critical role in the process of making meaning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

All youths in this study kept their view of God as an all-loving and omnipotent creator who ensures that good things happen to good people (Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000). Thus, the youths demonstrated a general tendency towards positive religious coping. No one questioned or expressed any doubt about the divinity or righteousness of God;

'I feel that God tells me I should not do those things, but still I was forced to do it and if I did not do it I would be killed. [...] it is like buying life' (Jackson).

Pargament et al. (2000) found that all aspects of positive religious coping are strongly associated with PTG. Additionally, Shaw, Joseph & Linley (2005) have identified qualitative and quantitative studies addressing religion, spirituality and growth. All of these studies support the idea that faith in God can be an important factor in the process of developing growth (Shaw et al., 2005).

In the PTG, signs of growth are connected to better understanding of spiritual matters and stronger religious beliefs (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), but since faith in God is very common in Uganda (Eichstaedt, 2009), explaining life circumstances as the will of God in itself might, however, not be enough to foster positive development following a traumatic event. Rather, it could be seen simply as an explanatory framework (Emmons, Colby & Kaiser, 1998) that provides the youths with an enhanced meaning of life, an increase in social support and acceptance of difficulties (Pargament, Desai & McConnell, 2006).

Limitations

The youths seemed reluctant to expand on their stories. This might be due to discomfort regarding any emotional implications of narrating their experiences with the LRA and the potential ensuing loss of control in the situation, fear of reexperiencing difficult memories, and a wish to deliver only the information they thought expected of them. The youths were interviewed only once and thus had only one chance to tell their stories, barring them from any opportunity to reveal alternative perspectives through retelling. Because of the relatively limited sample size and the fact that there was no control group, the findings of the study cannot easily be generalised. As the themes may have different connotations in other cultures, this could also impact the transferability.

Considerations for practice

The narratives of the present study revealed that the community most often disapproved of the competences gained, the training received and the roles assumed while with the LRA. Yet, according to Veale & Stavrou (2003), youths formerly associated with armed forces seemed to have acquired

leadership qualities. Additionally, teachers and community leaders in Northern Uganda have stated that some of the returning youths were stronger and more confident than children who had never been abducted (Veale & Stavrou, 2003). One way of increasing the chance of growth is therefore to regard the learned positions and competences from the LRA as resources rather than hindrances (Lenz, 2004).

The four themes in this study can be used to support psychosocial interventions as it provides knowledge about the kind of interventions that will influence the potential for growth for youth formerly associated with armed forces. As the youths did not find any motivation in looking for a better future in their stigmatised past, practitioners had an important mission not only to open the eyes of the youths to ways of enhancing their opportunities and resources, but just as importantly, the eyes of their families, friends and communities.

The following are considerations for practice, when doing interventions focusing on generating growth among youths formerly associated with the LRA in Northern Uganda:

- **Social support** – bearing in mind that social support from significant others offers many different kinds of support, all the people significant to the youths' development should participate in the intervention. The findings in this study suggest that it is important to pay special attention to the communities, as the prejudices and negative judgments from the communities create particular challenges for youths attempting to engage in positive development. The youths need a supportive environment in which to unfold and develop competences to gain acceptance successfully.

- **Participation** – receiving education, gaining knowledge and training skills useful to the community will not only give the youths the ability to make positive contributions acknowledged by the community, but also to uphold their own dreams and hopes for the future. Additionally, it is important to create an environment with opportunities for the youth to feel empowered, to be like others and participate equally.
- **Self-perception** – enhancing the changes of developing a positive self-perception among the youth by influencing significant others' perceptions and narrations of the youth. That is, creating a common narrative of youth formerly associated with armed forces as someone with experiences from the past that can be of use in the future. In case of a need for disclosure, a qualified audience consisting of professionals or equals should be available to the youths.
- **Faith in God** – the strong faith in God should be perceived as a resource useful to motivate the youths' participation in respectable activities. Religion provides a framework for the youth to participate in positive activities, and to be with people who share their religious views, thus be part of group that has a common focus and shared values.

Further research is needed to qualify the practical potential of the above considerations to enhance growth in a Ugandan context. Furthermore, validation of the PTG concept in a Ugandan context is needed.

This study found two cultural aspects relevant to future research in Uganda. Firstly, the youths in this study focused mainly on actions rather than thoughts. The PTG model underlines the importance of cognitive processing in the progression of

PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). This difference in focus might be related to cultural differences. Emphasising descriptions of actions rather than cognitions might reveal more relevant information about possibilities for PTG in the youths of Northern Uganda.

Secondly, this study reveals that culture defines the amount and content of stories constructed and told. In the Ugandan culture, nondisclosure seemingly reduces negative consequences (Tankink, 2004). This challenges the importance that Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) allocate to the disclosure process in the PTG model. Additionally, the importance of PTG as a common discourse in the culture (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) is also challenged, as it does not seem to be a natural element in the communal Ugandan. The impact of culture is found to be paramount;

'life stories are constructed, told and understood according to the narrative assumptions, parameters, frames, and taboos that prevail within a particular culture' (Pals & McAdams, 2004).

To summarise, this study suggests that future research on the enhancement of growth among youths formerly associated with armed forces in Uganda explores the validity of the four themes discussed above and the culturally specific aspects identified in this study. In his Mozambique study from 2006, Boothby found that avoidance was one of two strategies linked to decrease in posttraumatic stress symptoms. Considering instability, limited psychosocial services and the importance of community relations, this appears to be a constructive coping strategy (Corbin, 2008). Regardless of the emphasis on cognitive restructuring in the PTG model, Maercker & Zoellner's (2004) review

study revealed that cognitive avoidance of the traumatic event might also be related to PTG.

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¹ By using 'formerly associated with armed forces' rather than 'child soldier' this article strives to separate actions from identity, hence not to label the individual due to previously, forced actions.

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