



Post-traumatic Growth: The Roles of the Sense of Entitlement, Gratitude and hope

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Abstract

People believe that they are entitled to well-being and safety, and their responses to unexpected traumatic events reveal individual differences. Their reactions vary, from feeling blocked and distressed to feeling proactive towards new growth, depending on their personal resources. The current study sought to identify the role of entitlement in explaining post-traumatic growth (PTG) while considering the role of gratitude and hope as personal resources. We used a community-based sample of Israeli adults ($n=182$) who reported experiencing a traumatic event during the preceding year. The relationships between PTG and their sense of entitlement, gratitude, and hope were examined. A stepwise multiple hierarchical regression revealed that all the three variables were associated with PTG. However, the effect of hope turned insignificant with the inclusion of sense of entitlement and gratitude in the regression. Sense of entitlement and gratitude were independently associated with PTG. The theoretical contribution of these findings is discussed, as well as their interventional implications and future directions.

Keywords Post-traumatic growth · Sense of entitlement · Hope · Gratitude

Throughout their lives, most individuals experience some traumatic events, such as the unexpected death of a relative, a life-threatening disease, or an injury (Benjet et al., 2016). There is a high prevalence of lifetime exposure to potentially traumatic events, estimated at nearly 70% in community samples (Benjet et al., 2016; Goldstein et al., 2016; Knipscheer et al., 2020). A considerable proportion of the population

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are exposed to four or more potentially traumatic events during their lives (Atwoli et al., 2013; Benjet et al., 2016). These traumatic events may have detrimental effects on well-being. Those who undergo, or witness, a traumatic event may experience painful recollections, flashbacks, recurrent dreams or nightmares, or avoidance of activities or places, to name just a few (APA, 2022). However, these negative consequences are not predestined or the whole of an individual's reaction, and some individuals may experience personal growth, leading to improved functioning and well-being (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The psychological process of growth following adversity may require drawing on personal resources as well as relying on supportive interpersonal resources (Tedeschi et al., 2018). The goals of this study are to examine the relationship between individuals' sense of entitlement and personal growth in the aftermath of a traumatic event, and to clarify the roles played by hope and gratitude in this relationship.

1 Post-traumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) refers to positive psychological changes that lead to personal growth after experiencing a trauma. PTG may occur after the traumatic event is perceived as an experience which has significant meaning in one's overall life experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). These positive psychological changes can manifest in enhanced positive self-views, changed perspectives on life, spiritual changes, improved relationships with others, and an increased appreciation of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tsai et al., 2016). Additionally, PTG has been recognized as a buffer for the traumatic event's negative effects, such as distress and depression (Wu et al., 2019) found that nearly half of their participants reported moderate-to-high PTG after experiencing a traumatic event. PTG was documented across different samples including, but not limited to, individuals coping with medical conditions such as cancer (e.g., Boyacıoğlu et al., 2022; Marziliano et al., 2020), or individuals who were exposed to repeated acts of terrorism (Johnson et al., 2009).

Prior research has focused attention on the role of personal and interpersonal factors in predicting PTG, such as coping strategies and social support (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). The association between sense of entitlement and PTG has a unique theoretical significance due to the complexity in its negative or positive outcomes.

2 Sense of Entitlement

A sense of entitlement refers to the subjective perception that a person deserves that their needs—such as help, services and resources—to be met (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2017). Sense of entitlement as a personality characteristic reflects the belief that individuals have rights and privileges relating to positive outcomes (Campbell et al., 2004; Grubbs & Exline, 2016). The conceptualization of this multidimensional construct highlights its maladaptive and adaptive aspects. It can be either detrimental or beneficial to well-being and relationships (Candel & Turliuc, 2017), as it can lead

to both functional and negative consequences (e.g., Neville & Fisk 2019; Fisk, 2010). Past research suggests that individuals with a high sense of entitlement expect to receive help, services, and resources to meet their needs (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2017). As such, the sense of entitlement may lead to negative outcomes in terms of anger, frustration and viewing outcomes as unfair or unsatisfactory. Thus, individuals with a high sense of entitlement may show non-adaptive behaviors when there is a large gap between the expected help or provisions and their availability (Golann & Darling-Aduana, 2020).

Yet, the sense of entitlement may also lead to adaptive proactive coping mechanisms with hardships, particularly with traumatic events. For example, sense of entitlement is coupled with overall life satisfaction (George-Levi & Laslo-Roth 2021). Since the sense of entitlement can lead to contradictory effects on the individuals' functioning, it is of great importance to get in-depth understanding to the impact of a sense of entitlement on individuals' ability to cope with distress, especially as related to potentially traumatic events. Thus, the aim of the current study is to examine the link between the sense of entitlement and PTG. In order to further examine outcomes from traumatic experiences, we explored the role of two personal resources, hope and gratitude, reflecting future expectations and experiences, respectively (Emmons et al., 2019; Snyder, 2002).

3 Hope

Hope enables individuals to set valued goals, identify the means to achieve these goals, and summon the drive and personal energy to achieve them (Snyder, 2002). Hope theory emphasizes a persistent, cross-situational, dispositional, goal-directed cognitive set. Snyder defines hope as a set of beliefs that involves two relatively distinct ways of thinking about a goal: agentic thinking and pathways thinking. Agentic thoughts relate to success in reaching goals, whereas pathways thoughts involve one's effectiveness when pursuing different means to obtain goals (Schaffer et al., 2022; Snyder et al., 2002a, b).

Hope theory has become the focus of extensive research, demonstrating its important implications for promoting individuals' well-being (Gallagher & Lopez, 2018). High levels of hope have been associated with positive outcomes in various domains, such as academics, work, athletics, and health (Gallagher & Lopez, 2018; Moss-Pech et al., 2021). Increased hope is also related to happiness, perceived control, psychological adjustment, and well-being (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Snyder et al., 2002a). Individuals with a high level of hope are more likely to find meaning in adversity (Feldman, 2005), as hope is coupled with a sense of meaning in life (Feldman et al., 2009), suggesting a powerful link between hope and growth after a traumatic event (e.g., Wang et al., 2021). Previous studies on the relations of hope and PTG demonstrated the hope's mediating role between negative emotions such as depression or stress and PTG (Corrado et al., 2022; Heidarzadeh et al., 2016; Laslo-Roth et al., 2022); as well as between social support and PTG (Zhou et al., 2018). This pioneering study focused on the sense of entitlement among mothers of children with developmental disabilities revealed the moderating role of hope between the positive

impact of sense of entitlement on PTG (George-Levi & Laslo-Roth, 2021) calling for additional studies in order to examine these relations.

4 Gratitude

Defined as the appreciative functioning that involves appraisals of benefits and support (Rusk et al., 2016), gratitude is the adaptive behavior of recognizing and responding to the assistance of others that helps one to achieve positive outcomes (Lim, 2010). Gratitude involves awareness and acknowledgement of the value and meaning of positive events, behaviors, or objects, as well as feelings of an emotional constructive connection to them (Adler & Fagley, 2005). Gratitude reflects both a state and a trait (Skrzelinska & Ferreira, 2020). “State” gratitude is an attribution-dependent, affective-cognitive state, based on the appraisal of a positive outcome and the recognition of its external source. “Trait” gratitude represents a broader life orientation involving noticing and being grateful for various positive aspects of the world.

State and trait gratitude are considered beneficial for both physical and mental health (Emmons et al., 2019) and are predictive of well-being (Kardas et al., 2019). Individuals with a grateful perspective on life are likely to experience positive emotions (McCullough et al., 2002), and demonstrate prosocial behaviors (Wood et al., 2010). Gratitude contributes to happiness and optimism, and is associated with satisfaction in relationships and in life (Noh & Shin, 2008).

Highly grateful individuals tend to appreciate everyday events and to cope effectively with traumatic events (Fredrickson, 2004; McCullough et al., 2002). Thus, gratitude may be associated with PTG, while moderating the negative impact that different risk and traumatic factors have on PTG (Kim & Bae, 2019; Lin et al., 2022; Vieselmeyer et al., 2017).

5 The Current Study

The current study focuses on the association of the sense of entitlement with post-traumatic growth (PTG). In addition, hope and gratitude are proposed as personal resources that represent future and past perspectives on life. The goals of the study are to identify the role of entitlement gratitude and hope relations with post-traumatic growth (PTG). Early studies examined the relationships between hope and gratitude to positive outcomes separately. Since the impact of these variables were not examined in conjunction with sense of entitlement, we did not formulate specific hypotheses.

6 Method

6.1 Participants and Procedure

The study consisted of 182¹ participants (146 women and 36 men) ranging from 19- to 78-years-old ($M=37.15$, $SD=11.61$). There was no significant difference in age between men and women. We recruited Israeli adults residing in Lod, a Jewish-Muslim “mixed city” (Yacobi, 2009) located in the central district of Israel. The city is characterized by a relatively low socioeconomic status (ranked 4th lowest in the country) and its citizens are constantly subjected to high levels of stress (e.g., exposure to frequent incidents of severe violence)².

We included in this study only participants who reported experiencing a significant traumatic event that affected their life during the previous year. Participants reported personal (e.g., COVID-19, severe health problems, major surgery, academic challenge and stress, sexual abuse, economic distress), familial (e.g., death in the close family, conflicts with family members, divorce, children with disabilities) and interpersonal (riots in the city, exposure to aggressive behavior at work or in the street (traumatic events. The impact of the traumatic events varied from *low* (1) to *very high* (9), $M=8.51$, $SD=1.89$, with most (76.3%) of the participants reporting a high impact (7–9 scores). Gender comparisons revealed a significant difference, ($t(180)=2.21$, $p=0.02$, Hedges’ $g=0.41$) with women reporting higher levels of stress ($M=8.66$, $SD=1.80$) than men ($M=7.89$, $SD=2.10$). There was a positive association between age and the impact of the traumatic event ($r(n=182)=0.23$, $p<0.01$). Older participants reported higher levels of traumatic impact than younger participants did. Out of the sample, 123 (67.6%) participants indicated having at least one child. Being a parent had a positive effect on PTG – $t(180) = -3.39$, $p=0.001$, Hedges’ $g=0.53$, so that parents ($M=4.33$, $SD=0.88$) showed increased levels of PTG compared with non-parents ($M=3.84$, $SD=0.97$).

Participants were recruited via an appeal advertisement posted on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook groups) and distributed by municipal SMS distribution. The survey was administered online via Qualtrics. The participants did not receive any compensation for their participation. Prior to participation, participants signed a consent form that explained that their responses would be anonymous and were provided through the researchers’ contact information.

Two hundred fifty-four participants completed the questionnaire. We removed six respondents, due to the suspicion that they were filled out by the same users. We also excluded participants who did not indicate that they were influenced by a traumatic event and those with missing data. Thus, the final sample included 182 participants (See Table 1).

¹ We computed an a priori power analysis using G*Power3 (Faul, ErdfelderBuchner, & Lang, 2009) for linear multiple regression (fixed model, R square increase), including the three factors (a power of 80% and an alpha value of 0.05). As this is the first study to investigate this hypothesis, we were not able to base the expected strength of the effect sizes on previous findings. We therefore anticipated a small to medium effect size of $f=0.15$ for all the investigated hypothesis, and the analysis suggested a sample size of 77.

² See - <https://www.timesofisrael.com/6-people-including-children-wounded-in-suspected-criminal-shooting-in-lod/>.

Table 1 Demographic Information

| | | N=182 | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| | | Frequency | Percent |
| Gender | Male | 36 | 19.8 |
| | Female | 146 | 80.2 |
| Age category | 19–29 | 50 | 27.5 |
| | 30–39 | 64 | 35.2 |
| | 40–49 | 40 | 22.0 |
| | 50–59 | 19 | 10.4 |
| | 60–69 | 7 | 3.8 |
| | 70–79 | 2 | 1.1 |
| Level of education | Primary school | 1 | 0.5 |
| | High school | 38 | 20.9 |
| | Above high school | 21 | 11.5 |
| | Bachelor's degree or equivalent | 75 | 41.2 |
| | Master's degree | 27 | 14.8 |
| | Doctoral degree | 3 | 1.6 |
| Parenthood | Parents | 123 | 67.6 |
| | Not parents | 59 | 32.4 |
| | Certificate studies | 10 | 5.5 |
| | Other | 7 | 3.8 |
| Marital status | Married | 126 | 69.2 |
| | Single | 34 | 18.7 |
| | Divorced | 12 | 6.6 |
| | In relationship | 10 | 5.5 |

6.2 Measures

Sense of entitlement. The Entitlement Questionnaire—Short Form was used to assess participants' beliefs regarding their sense of entitlement (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2017). This scale consists of 15 items ranked on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). In the current study, only the active sense of entitlement subscale (5 items) was included, which is based on enhancing self-interest and self-reliance in achieving life goals (e.g., “I deserve the best”). For the current study, a Cronbach's α reliability of 0.71 was obtained.

Gratitude. The Gratitude Questionnaire–6 (*GQ-6*) is a six-item measure of feeling grateful across situations. (e.g., “I have so much in life to be thankful for”) using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) (McCullough et al., 2002). For the current study a Cronbach's α reliability of 0.81 was obtained.

Hope. A Hebrew adaptation (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006) of the Trait Hope Scale (Snyder, 2002) was used to assess levels of hopeful thinking. The scale includes six items ranked on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*), and includes items such as “I can achieve most of my goals” and “Even when others want to give up, I know I can find ways to solve the problem.” Cronbach's α reliability for the scale in the current study was 0.86.

Post traumatic growth. The short Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI-SF, Cann et al., 2010) was used to assess PTG (e.g., Achepohl et al., 2022; Cann et al., 2010). Prior to the administration of this measure, participants were asked to recall

an event that caused them significant emotional stress during the previous year. They were asked to describe this traumatic event and to rate its impact (i.e., “to what degree did you feel that the event affected you”) on 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 10 (*to a large extent*). The participants marked 0 if they had not experienced a traumatic event within the previous year. These participants were not included in the study. Then, the participants were asked to complete the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory, which consists of 10 items (e.g., “I changed my priorities about what is important in life”) ranked on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*to a large extent*)³. Cronbach’s α reliability for the scale in the current study was 0.84.

Demographics. Participants responded to several demographic items, including age, gender, level of education, marital and parental status.

7 Results

7.1 Preliminary Analysis

Pearson correlations between the research variables were performed (see Table 2). The results showed that hope was positively associated with the sense of entitlement, gratitude, and PTG. In addition, gratitude and PTG were positively associated with the sense of entitlement.

8 Stepwise Multiple Hierarchical Regression

We tested if the research variables significantly were correlated with participants’ ratings of PTG. We therefore conducted a stepwise multiple hierarchical regression, in which we entered in in the first step the demographic variables (age, gender and being a parent), as well as hope (unstandardized scores). Due to the abundant research showing its association with PTG, we included hope in the first step. The analysis yielded a significant effect for being a parent ($b=0.36$, $SE=0.16$, $p=0.02$, 95%CI [0.04, 0.68]), and hope ($b=0.28$, $SE=0.08$, $p=0.001$, 95%CI [0.11, 0.46]). In the second step, we entered the gratitude and sense of entitlement. In this analysis the gratitude and the sense of entitlement were significant (gratitude: $b=0.19$, $SE=0.06$, $p=0.003$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.32]; Entitlement: $b=0.24$, $SE=0.07$, $p=0.002$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.40]). However, the effects of hope and parenthood were no longer significant ($b=0.08$, $SE=0.09$, $p=0.40$, 95% CI [-1.13, 0.27]) and ($b=0.30$, $SE=0.16$, $p=0.057$,

Table 2 Means, SDs and correlations of the main variables

| | Mean (SD) | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. Sense of entitlement | 4.48 (0.87) | 0.282** | -0.015 | 0.254** |
| 2. Hope | 4.11 (0.76) | - | 0.451** | 0.257** |
| 3. Gratitude | 5.52 (1.14) | | - | 0.284** |
| 4. PTG | 4.17 (0.94) | | | - |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

³ The original measurement was scaled a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 5, but we modified the labels to 1 to 6 in order to make it compatible with the other measurements.

95%CI [-0.009, 0.622), respectively. The second step of the regression explained 19.6% of the variance in PTG - $F(6,175)=7.10, p<0.001$.

9 Discussion

The goals of the study are to identify the relations between entitlement, gratitude and hope with post-traumatic growth (PTG). To this end, we conducted a correlational study by using a community-based sample, drawn from a population at risk of experiencing potentially traumatic events.

Our results revealed a relationship between sense of entitlement and PTG. This finding extends the existent literature examining the effects of sense of entitlement, by showing that it can lead to positive results – in terms of enhanced coping with potentially traumatic events. By extension, a sense of entitlement may bring about other desirable outcomes, e.g., improved resilience. Future studies should put to test the under-explored effects of sense of entitlement on health-related aspects.

Given the interplay between hope and sense of entitlement (George-Levi & Laslo-Roth, 2021), it is possible that participants with a high sense of entitlement, who feel more deserving of help and support in times of need (Campbell et al., 2004; Grubbs & Exline, 2016), and also may experience higher levels of hope. It follows that their beliefs in their rights may support their ability to identify the goals they value and the means to achieve these goals, and to summon the drive to accomplish them (Snyder, 2002) which is related to increased personal growth. These results demonstrate that belief in the personal rights to positive outcomes, even following stressful and traumatic times, may empower future expectations, in terms of defining goals and acknowledging the ability to move forward towards a positive future. Since hopeful thinking has been related to positive and proactive outcomes, it leads to higher levels of PTG, in alignment with past studies (e.g., Wang et al., 2021).

In addition, as was previously noted, gratitude correlates with PTG, regardless of the level of sense of entitlement. The absence of correlation between sense of entitlement and gratitude suggests that these two dispositional traits are essentially different. However, both sense of entitlement and gratitude are significant for individuals to grow out of potentially traumatic event. In other words, the connection between beliefs in the personal right to positive outcomes, together with the ability to be grateful and appreciative regarding what has been already established, promotes individuals' power to overcome their trauma.

Our findings support previous studies that presented links between PTG and hope or PTG and gratitude (e.g., Heidarzadeh et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2022). The current study expands this understanding by turning the attention to the association of the sense of entitlement with PTG, which, to our best knowledge, has not been previously examined. Examining these factors in conjunction has a unique conceptual importance with implications for interventions. The emphasis on privileges and rights has been often considered as a negative trend of the current culture and younger generations and has been viewed as leading to negative outcomes. Our results support an alternative view, emphasizing the more beneficial, benevolent aspects of entitlement. By encouraging individuals to act upon what they believe is right for them, while

recognizing positive aspects in their life (without ignoring distressful situations) they may activate their coping resources. This aspect may provide an explanation for the ability to overcome trauma and strive for growth and development.

In addition, the results of the study lead us to propose that individuals with a higher sense of entitlement may be more inclined to seek out help when experiencing a potentially traumatic event. This assumption is further strengthened by previous studies suggesting that PTG is connected to coping strategies, such as social support (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009; Linley & Joseph, 2004), which are known to alleviate stress reactions after stressful life events (Cohen & Syme, 1985a, b), which can in turn foster PTG. Future studies could further explore the mediating roles of various social supports.

Given the high probability of experiencing potentially traumatic events during our lives (e.g., Cardoso et al., 2020; Knipscheer et al., 2020), this study yields some valuable insights in terms of clinical implications. Considering the complexity and multidimensional characteristics of PTG, intervention programs that aim to improve individuals' ability to cope with stressful events could consider an awareness of entitlement, hope, and gratitude. As sense of entitlement, gratitude, and hope can be induced or bolstered (e.g., Feldman, 2005; Redford & Ratliff, 2018; Zitek & Vincent, 2015; Killen & Macaskill, 2015), strengthening these beliefs may benefit individuals in times of stress. Therefore, elevating individuals' expectations of receiving help, services, and resources to meet their needs, while simultaneously empowering their appraisals of benefits and support and instilling hope language, may aid them in overcoming obstacles that arise during times of adversity. Our findings indicate that PTG may be achieved by distinct constructs and their interplay. Hence, future interventions should encourage participants to employ diverse sets of beliefs in order to increase their ability to grow and rediscover meanings in their lives.

10 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

These findings should be considered in light of certain limitations. First, while PTG is usually measured following a traumatic event (Wu et al., 2019), we employed a retrospective measurement asking the participants to recall an event that caused them significant emotional stress. The reliance on retrospective reports raises the possibility of misrepresentation of the reported event and its consequences. In order to reduce this risk, we instructed the participants to focus on an event that took place during the preceding year and to evaluate its long-term impact. Future studies should compare immediate outcomes after traumatic events with the measurements of memories.

A second limitation of the current study is related to the nature of the potentially traumatic events. The participants in this study reported a wide range of quite different traumatic events. Additionally, in this study we relied on the participants' subjective and intuitive rating of traumatic events and their severity, as these perceptions may be directly related to their accounts of PTG. Additional limitations concern sampling constraints, such as uneven recruitment of men and women and the use of a single community (with a high prevalence of traumatic events), and the use of self-report questionnaires. Future studies should focus on larger, more heterogeneous

samples and include in-depth interviews to understand the different paths of personal growth after experiencing a trauma.

Without ignoring these limitations, the findings from the current study shed light on the importance of sense of entitlement, gratitude, and hope in the promotion of PTG in individuals experiencing stressful events. In addition to the theoretical contribution, these findings can inform future interventions and preventive programs, targeting the promotion of growth following traumatic events, while appreciating the complexity and multidimensional impacts of risk situation, and calling for a consideration of individual differences while pursuing wellbeing.

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Data Availability The data and syntax that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, confino.dan@gmail.com.

Declarations

Disclosure statement No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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