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Growing from Doing Good in Later Life: Growth Themes in Narratives of Prosocial Behavior

by

Laura E. Graham

Claremont Graduate University

2019

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## **APPROVAL OF THE REVIEW COMMITTEE**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Laura E. Graham as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology.

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## Abstract

### Growing from Doing Good in Later Life:

### Growth Themes in Narratives of Prosocial Behavior

by

Laura E. Graham

Claremont Graduate University: 2019

Contemporary theories consider development to be lifelong, suggesting that although aging entails considerable loss, there is still potential to grow and to remain engaged in meaningful activities. Narrative studies have revealed a host of benefits for narrating one's life story with themes of growth and have found evidence of growth themes in personal narratives of older adults. Yet there is limited research focusing on specific experiences that elicit growth or development in older age. A significant portion of aging individuals engage in prosocial behavior, and empirical research using scales to measure well-being outcomes have revealed important benefits, but have overlooked how older adults narrate such experiences and the impact they have on the self. The current study uses a narrative perspective to examine the perceived personal impact of prosocial behavior, and explores when prosocial experiences can facilitate personal growth. Interviews from a sample of 47 older adults engaged in long-term prosocial commitments were analyzed to examine the impact of these behaviors on the self as well as patterns in high points and low points of the experience. Narrative analysis revealed the majority of participants reported a change in the self, and half of the sample used themes of personal growth to characterize the self-impact. Inductive coding of change narratives revealed an emergent category of virtuous change (e.g., transcendence, wisdom, humanity), as well as other changes such as hard skills, cognitive abilities, a sense of empowerment and happiness,

validation, and negative changes. The high-point stories were primarily about beneficiaries of the prosocial behavior; whereas low points focused on both external support issues and program inner workings but less on beneficiary stories. The stories told by those who grew were significantly more *integrated* than the stories of those who did not, displaying a multifaceted, complex understanding of significant episodes through a blend of both positive and negative elements within one story. Findings from this study suggest that an integrated understanding of the peaks and valleys of prosocial experiences may provide an avenue toward personal growth. Future narrative research can apply this approach across domains to understand the nuances of growth in later life from specific experiences. A better understanding of what growth from doing good looks like can inform individuals and society about how to maximize the benefits of prosocial behavior.

## Dedication

*This dissertation is dedicated to my family, without whom I would not know true virtue, growth,  
and love.*

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Traditional views of aging are being challenged by positive models that modify the dominant themes of loss and inactivity with the possibility of growth and engagement, even in old age. Researchers have begun to argue that personal growth is important for successful aging because it allows one to maintain satisfaction and constitutes an integral part of eudaimonia, a meaningful and virtuous happiness (Bauer & Park, 2010; Fisher, 1995; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005; Villar, 2012). Eudaimonia is not simply a state but requires virtuous action (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Positive models of aging echo this emphasis on engagement by deeming it integral for successful aging (for a review, see Cosco, Prina, Perales, Stephan, & Brayne, 2014).

Prosocial behavior (i.e., actions for the benefit of others) constitutes an activity that is both engaging and virtuous— an optimal choice for older adults whose time and resources may be limited; it benefits society and the self while supporting growth and further development.

Empirical research examining prosocial behavior has uncovered benefits for both the self and others (see Morrow-Howell, 2010, for a summary), suggesting that these behaviors may be an ideal choice for older adults in terms of the widespread positive outcomes. However, no studies have examined the perceived personal impact of prosocial behavior on the self, nor whether personal growth is perceived from prosocial behavior in older adulthood. This study focuses on improving the understanding of the perceived impact these experiences have on the self and what those experiences look like. Prosocial stories with themes of growth may constitute an optimal experience for older adults, allowing them to reap the benefits of growth in older age in addition to those gained from prosocial endeavors.

### **Well-being in Later Life: Personal Growth and Prosocial Engagement**

With evolving theories of lifespan development and the shift from disengagement theories toward positive aging (Johnson & Mutchler, 2013), the idea of growth and further development in old age is no longer inconceivable. In particular, the lifespan perspective offers a way of thinking about development as occurring throughout the life course and involving growth, maintenance, and the regulation of loss in varying degrees at each developmental period (Baltes, 1987; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). This perspective considers plasticity, or the capacity for change, as being possible across the lifespan (Baltes, 1987). Although aging involves inevitable decline, the way in which the process unfolds can be influenced by the individual, depending on where they devote their energies, how they compensate for losses, and maximize their existing capacities (selection, optimization, and compensation, Baltes et al., 2006). Such a view has allowed for the consideration of growth as an aspect of aging and acknowledged an active role of the aging person in the process.

Although the potential of growth in aging is acknowledged in lifespan theories of development, the bulk of research has focused on engagement and maintenance as opposed to personal growth. The lifespan perspective considers “growth” a broad term that could involve a qualitative gain in a number of domains including biological, cognitive, psychological, and emotional, among others. This conception of growth as gain includes what psychologists refer to as “personal growth” which is generally considered internal, psychological self-improvement. Here, we focus broadly on personal growth, and later discuss growth themes in life narratives.

Personal growth is considered important through its role in eudaimonic well-being. The most widely used measure of eudaimonic well-being includes growth as one of six dimensions, and growth is also central in humanistic definitions of eudaimonic health (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961). Researchers have argued that personal growth, along with autonomy and a sense

of purpose, is particularly relevant for older adults to maintain satisfaction (Payne, 1977). Studies examining lay interpretations of aging well show that older adults include personal growth as an important feature of successful aging (Fisher, 1995; Reichstadt, Sengupta, Depp, Palinkas, & Jeste, 2010). Empirical research examining personal growth in older age does suggest it can be present in older adulthood but not necessarily normative; and a sense that one is continuing to grow and develop may remain stable throughout adulthood (Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005) or decline with age, indicating that individuals believe that they are growing and developing less than younger populations (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The narrative perspective maintains that the narrative identity is continually revised throughout the lifespan and a longitudinal narrative study found that events individuals choose to narrate change with time, suggesting that new experiences in adulthood may be incorporated into a sense of self (McAdams et al., 2006). However, studies have yet to investigate transformative events that specifically occur in adulthood. The ambiguity and lack of extensive knowledge about growth at this developmental period calls for an understanding of the process of personal growth in older age and how growth is interpreted as happening in older age as the result of specific experiences.

Narrative research involves retrospective accounts of experiences that allow for an examination of how, when and from which experiences growth is derived and how these experiences are integrated into a sense of self. Growth themes in life narratives are interpretations of personally meaningful self-improvement resulting from experiences. The narrative approach allows individuals to naturalistically generate themes of growth as opposed to answering explicit self-report questions aimed at examining whether individuals value growth or have grown in their lifetime in general, in addition to shedding light on the process of interpreting experiences in a way that is conducive to eudaimonic well-being. Such studies have

found growth themes in older age (e.g., Bauer & Park, 2010), but not all stories of well-being are growth stories and achieving further development from experiences is dependent upon what the person chooses to do and their interpretation of how they were impacted. Identifying the impact of specific experiences on the self through narrative studies can uncover how these experiences can be a pathway to personal growth. One promising context for a pathway toward growth may be prosocial behavior, given that it is a universal experience which can be a source of meaning and purpose, as well as an expression of virtue.

Along with other theories of successful aging, the lifespan perspective promotes remaining engaged by initiating adaptive processes in everyday life, which could be satisfied by a broad range of activities spanning from work-related endeavors to leisure activities. One common choice for engagement among older adults is prosocial behavior, or behavior that benefits others (Midlarsky, Kahana, & Besler, 2015). Prosocial behavior allows for exercising existing capacities, as well as inciting positive change both social and personal. From a social standpoint, engaging in prosocial behavior offers an opportunity for older adults to contribute to society by using their skills in an effort to ameliorate societal problems, while also potentially changing negative perceptions of the aging population. On a personal level, prosocial behavior allows individuals to remain engaged, maintain capacities, and may be a source of personal growth. This activity seems particularly valuable in that it boasts empirically tested positive outcomes, which will be discussed later.

Personal growth and prosocial behavior represent two facets of aging well but few studies have examined them together. Growth in the context of prosocial behavior is of particular interest given that prosocial behavior is one type of virtuous action that constitutes “being good” in a eudaimonic sense (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Aristotle believed that becoming good

requires doing good (Cahn, 1990). Examining themes of growth in prosocial narratives might shed light on how such virtuous action leads to the betterment of the aging individual as a result of enacting virtue. From an aging perspective, Villar (2012) calls for a greater emphasis on personal growth in models of successful aging and suggests including a prosocial element. He argues that actions in the benefit of others (along with the motivations and goals those actions entail) may represent successful aging that goes beyond maintenance and regulation; and facilitates personal growth. Prosocial behavior may be the key to growth and further development in older age and including it in a model of successful aging would facilitate a view of aging where gains and growth are possible. However, the extent to which individuals grow from such experiences and how they understand these experiences has yet to be explored. The present study aims to fill this gap by looking at the ways individuals narrate personal change from prosocial behavior and identifying features of experiences that lead towards growth.

The current project is an exploratory study of prolonged prosocial experiences in older adulthood. Narratives from a sample of nationally recognized older adults engaging in extended prosocial commitments will be used to analyze the impact of these experiences on the self. We are particularly interested in when individuals perceive the self-impact to be personal growth, and seek to identify features of the prosocial experience that characterize a prosocial growth story. The study uses a narrative perspective to understand how these experiences are integrated into a sense of self. This perspective captures one's own understanding of the experience and personal impact while allowing for the possibility of different forms of impact to emerge (Pals & McAdams, 2004).

The sections that follow provide context for the current study by giving an overview of previous work on both growth and prosocial behavior to consider a path toward optimal



development, and how it may be studied through narrative. First, we provide an overview of narrative research to give necessary background on how growth from life experiences can be deeply understood by measuring how experiences are integrated into a sense of self. Next, we review narrative research focusing on growth themes including the ways in which it is studied, beneficial outcomes, and how it has been used to examine specific episodes and connections to the self. We then discuss prosocial behavior in older adulthood, specifically focusing on beneficial outcomes as well as the impact they may have on the self and what narrative studies say about moral behavior more generally. Finally, we consider how prosocial behavior and personal growth may be studied together from a narrative perspective for a better understanding of the ways in which older adults believe they are impacted by prosocial behavior, and how such behavior may be perceived as a source of personal growth.

### **Narrative Research Method as a Tool for Understanding the Self**

Narrative psychology offers a perspective through which accounts of individuals' lives may be examined to capture how experiences are perceived as impacting the self. This perspective is grounded on the premise that individuals use stories to make sense of their lives and ultimately of who they are (McAdams 1995, 2001, 2013). People construct personal stories about the past complete with characters, themes, plots and patterns. The narrative perspective holds that life stories are what form one's identity; thus, they can be analyzed to shed light on issues relating to personality and identity development. Individuals construct an identity by making sense of experiences and potentially incorporating the experience into an internalized story of the self, termed the "narrative identity" (McAdams, 2013). Narratives provide evidence of how individuals incorporate experiences into a sense of self while also reflecting one's current self. Although there are a variety of ways researchers have distinguished "self" and "identity,"

the relationship between them from this perspective can be understood by using William James' explanation of the "duplex self" as both "I" and "Me" (James, 1963). Regarding narrative psychology, the "self" pertains to both the process of narration, the "I," and the object and product of that narration, the "Me," when the story of "Me" has coherence, unity, and purpose, it is said to have the quality of a "narrative identity" (McAdams, 1996, 2018). This paper follows this way of thinking and for simplicity will use the term "self" when referring to the "Me" aspect of self. Evidence of how the self is constructed is present in how one narrates past experiences, the interpretation of and meaning attached to past events says something about who an individual has become. The story is dynamic, rarely static and final, but is constantly revised to answer to changing contexts, motivations, and developmental demands (McAdams, 2008).

The narrative method involves analyzing qualitative data about one's life. By collecting and analyzing life stories, narrative researchers can examine how experiences have impacted the self. The data used in narrative analyses ranges from transcripts of entire life stories to written key scenes to more specific, isolated episodes about discrete events (Adler et al., 2017). Studies identify and code narrative elements of concern, typically motivational themes (e.g., agency, communion) affective sequences (e.g., redemption, contamination), integrative meaning (e.g., meaning-making, exploratory processing), or structural components (e.g., coherence and complexity). In contrast to traditional psychoanalytic perspectives, this approach aims to examine features of narratives (e.g., motivational themes, affective tone, integrative meaning, structural elements) to reveal individual differences in how individuals construct life stories and how these features relate to personality development and well-being, as opposed to using narratives as a tool for psycho-analysis of unconscious drives and diagnosis, the unfolding of

physiological systems, or with the intention of shifting narration to gain perspective (e.g., Freud, 1949; Schaefer, 1980).

Collectively, narrative studies have revealed how narrating one's life with specific themes relates to personality measures as well as measures of health and well-being (Adler, Lodi-Smith, & Houle, 2016), indicating that the way in which one narrates one's life contributes to who one is, has implications for well-being, and corresponds to personality. For example, communal themes (those that reflect focus on others) correlate with well-being, whereas agentic themes (those focused on oneself) do not (Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; McAdams, 1995). Further, those who score highly on generativity (concern for future generations) tend to narrate their lives with themes of redemption, or sequences that move from affectively bad to affectively good (McAdams, 2006; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997).

Using narrative methods to analyze questions of identity development and self-transformation is particularly useful for discovering the impact of experiences on the self. Narratives can serve as an analytical tool that sheds light on a deeper level of self beyond traits and character adaptations (McAdams & Pals, 2006). McAdams and colleagues have demonstrated the fluid nature of the life story through longitudinal studies examining identity change across adolescence and into adulthood (see McAdams & Olson, 2010, for a review). By allowing individuals to naturalistically generate narratives of their experiences, researchers are able to identify the variety of outcomes in how these experiences are integrated into a sense of self. For example, some stories are understood as having continuity with the current self, they reflect and confirm a stable quality or aspect of one's identity, whereas others convey self-transformation as the result of the event, and still others dis-confirm the self and may still require reflection (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007).

Narrative studies commonly look across key life chapters and the entire life story, but some focus on an even greater level of specificity by looking at narratives of particular instances or within certain contexts rather than general life chapters such as childhood or adulthood. This allows researchers to discern something about the meaning derived from a particular type of experience. Dunlop (2015, 2017) suggests that examining context-specific narratives allows for a better understanding of which experiences within a particular domain (e.g., prosocial behavior) are relevant to one's narrative identity. McLean and colleagues (2007) argue that "situated stories" have implications for the long-term development of the self and focus on context-specific stories allows us to answer questions about the impact of such experiences. Mclean and colleagues (2016) later found evidence to support this notion in a study of content domains in relation to identity development. A variety of topics have been explored using this approach such as alcoholism (Dunlop & Tracy, 2013), divorce (King & Raspin, 2004), having a child with Down syndrome (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000), religious conversion and career transitions (Bauer & McAdams, 2004b), within ethnic and academic domains (Syed, 2012) and love lives (Dunlop, Bannon, & McAdams, 2017). Further, one study demonstrated how the variance of coherence (i.e., themes, context, chronology) ratings in life narratives was best explained by both individual differences and event-type (Watters, 2019). This suggests that although narrative style plays a role in how events are narrated, a consideration of the type of event narrated is necessary to understand how they are differentially integrated into a sense of self. Focusing in on specific events can shed light on how particular types of events can contribute to one's identity, or positive/negative trajectories.

Narrative studies have enriched the understanding of personality development and convey the importance of how our perception of events impacts our personal identity. Despite

the variety of narrative variables examined and units of analysis, the narrative approach allows individuals to naturalistically relate events to the self and to generate meaning from experiences, topics often overlooked or not captured by standardized scales. One prominent focus in narrative research involves personal growth. In order to understand how an individual comes to integrate an experience into the sense of self or engages in self-transformation, it is beneficial, therefore, to look at themes of growth and transformation within the life story.

### **Growth Themes in Life Narratives**

One way to look at the development of a person across time within narrative is to examine themes of growth. The concept of growth in narrative studies generally refers to a perceived progressive development of the self as the result of an event (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008). Narrating an event with themes of growth imbues the event with meaning. The way in which growth is studied varies, as it has been studied as personally meaningful self-improvement (Bauer et al., 2008; Bauer, Tasdemir-Ozdes, & Larkina, 2014; Bauer & McAdams 2004a, 2010) self-transformation themes (Pals, 2006b; Whitehead & Bates, 2016), self-event connections (Pals 2006a; Pasupathi, Mansour & Brubaker, 2007), positive, integrative, or differentiated processing (Bauer & Bonnano, 2001; King et al., 2000; Lilgendahl, Helson, & John, 2013; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011) or autobiographical reasoning (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Researchers have uncovered a variety of growth themes, such as gain, redemption, recovery, intrinsic, integrative/intellectual, differentiated/positive processing, and self-redemption (see Adler, 2017, for a list of narrative variables). The variety of definitions and types of growth have allowed for a rich understanding of how growth is understood and the measures to which it relates.

Many narrative studies are interested in identifying consistent themes throughout the entire life story. Studies of growth are no exception as many focus on key scenes such as high points, low points, and turning points (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; Cox & McAdams, 2014; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). These studies are concerned more with what it means to be growth-oriented for the person, as opposed to examining growth resulting from a specific event. These studies have found individual differences in narration of growth—not all stories are growth stories, and some are more likely to use growth themes (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008). Stories with growth themes, however, show a host of benefits for growth-oriented individuals through their relationships with favorable qualities such as openness, maturity (e.g., King et al., 2000; King & Raspin, 2004; Lilgendahl, Helson, & John, 2013), and various measures of well-being (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005).

One major way growth narratives are considered favorable is through their relationship with well-being; in particular, with Aristotle's meaningful happiness, *eudaimonia*. As discussed earlier, personal growth is considered an aspect of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 1989). Given this relationship, growth themes are important in that they “reveal one process of interpreting life in a way conducive to eudaimonic well-being” (p. 82, Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008). Narrative research has revealed a consistent relationship between growth themes and eudaimonic well-being, even when controlling for personality traits (Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006b) and growth-orientation (Bauer, Graham, Lauber, & Lynch, 2018). One focus has been to disentangle the relationship between growth narratives and well-being. Bauer and colleagues (2005) found that having more growth themes in high points, low points, and turning points was related to higher levels of both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. They differentiated types of growth and found that those with the

highest levels of well-being had more intrinsic growth themes (humanistic concerns) and individuals who scored high on maturity measures used integrative growth themes (differentiating and integrating new perspectives). Regardless, both types of growth themes related more to eudaimonic well-being than hedonic well-being. The relationship between eudaimonic well-being and intrinsic growth has also been found to be true of growth goals, and again intrinsic goals were more characteristic of those with high levels of maturity, whereas those with the highest levels of PWB emphasized intrinsic growth goals (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a). Lilgendahl and McAdams (2011) found that two forms of growth-related narrative processing (differentiated and positive) were significantly related to eudaimonic well-being. Taken together, these studies emphasize how growth narratives, and in particular the type that is focused on others, are inextricably tied to eudaimonic well-being.

Findings related to growth narratives go beyond simple correlation. In a longitudinal study, Bauer and McAdams (2010) found that agentic growth goals predicted increases in ego development 3.5 years later, and communal growth goals predicted increases in subjective well-being. Further, two studies showed that growth in the form of accommodative processing resulted in higher levels of maturity as measured by ego development two years later (King et al., 2000; King & Raspin, 2004). These longitudinal studies suggest that perceiving growth from experiences prompts further development in the future and increases in happiness.

Looking across key scenes for themes of growth has allowed for the identification of a “growth story,” or a life narrative that consistently showcases one’s personal development (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008). Bauer and colleagues argue that growth stories are not simply derivatives of personality traits, but that because relationships between favorable outcomes such as well-being persist when controlling for traits and demographic variables, growth stories

themselves matter for well-being. Drawing conclusions about the growth story in general demonstrates how using growth themes is advantageous but generalizing across scenes obscures the ability to identify which types of experiences are growth-inducing. Two ways to consider the impact of a type of event on the self are through identifying self-event connections and using specific narrative episodes.

One way growth has been assessed in narrative research is by identifying self-event connections, or causal connections. Although growth is seen as relating to identity development, this way of measuring growth allows for an examination of how a particular event relates directly to the self from the narrator's perspective. Pals (2006a, p. 176) argues that forming causal connections is "a process of self-making through which individuals highlight significant experiences from the past and infuse them with self-defining meaning in the present by interpreting them as having a causal impact on the growth of the self." Employing this approach has allowed researchers to identify types of self-event connections and their differential implications for development. For example, Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker (2007) posit that causal connections as compared to no connection or those that maintain a sense of self may have a greater impact on one's self concept and may entail that new qualities are integrated into one's self concept. This method is typically used to examine the general process of self-making but is also beneficial for the current study by enabling an assessment of when a specific event, prosocial experience, has a direct impact on the self. Grouping individuals based on causal connections from specific events allows for a better understanding of how these experiences impact the self and potentially lead towards growth.

A few narrative studies have looked at specific episodes to examine how growth is derived from types of events. In general context-specific stories have implications for the larger



narrative-identity (McLean et al., 2007) and isolating the focus to specific experiences allows for an understanding of how types of experiences are integrated into a sense of self. Narrowing focus from the entire life story to specific episodes allows for a more fine-tuned examination of how growth is derived from certain types of experiences.

For example, Pals (2006a, 2006b) examines the process and implications for growth resulting from difficult life experiences. This research points to two mechanisms that constitute positive self-transformation following a difficult life event. The first, exploratory processing, involves reflecting upon and making sense of the difficult event with an openness to learning from it. The second, positive resolution, involves having a sense of positively-valenced closure following a negative event. Those who engage in this type of processing are shown to score higher on measures of happiness as well as maturity.

Similarly, King and colleagues have looked at how narration of specific events relates to maturity and well-being (King et al., 2000; King & Hicks, 2006; King & Patterson, 2000; King & Raspin, 2004; King & Smith, 2004). In one study, King and colleagues (2000) asked parents of children with Down syndrome to tell the story of when their child was diagnosed. They found that features within the story such as happy endings were related to well-being. Stories in which parents talked of experiencing a paradigm shift (e.g., accommodative change) were related to stress-related growth and ego development, demonstrating how such change from a specific event impacts personal growth and maturity. Similar effects are found when examining negative event narratives across time. King and Hicks (2006) have found that elaborated, thoughtful accounts of possible selves in light of difficult events result in increased maturity, even years later. In a short-term longitudinal study, Mansfield and colleagues (2015) found that growth from transgressions was related to higher levels of well-being, self-compassion, and forgiveness over

the span of one month. Taken together, these studies have shown the importance of deriving growth from specifically negative events for development and well-being, and shed light on the narrative features of growth stories from negative events.

The large majority of narrative studies examining growth from specific events focus on growth from negative experiences. However, there is evidence that growth is derived from positive events as well. One study examining patterns of autobiographical reasoning and well-being found that events with a positive valence were significantly related to a perceived positive impact on the self (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). Further, Whitehead and Baltes (2016) found evidence of transformation (e.g., exploration, positive resolution, and growth themes) in both nadir and peak experiences and both were related to hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Contrary to their hypothesis, transformative nadir experiences were not significantly more predictive of eudaimonic well-being than peak experiences, suggesting that both types of experiences can not only be growth experiences, but growth from either may be equally beneficial in terms of well-being. Similarly, research on self–event connections has shown that more positive connections to the self in high points is related to higher psychological well-being (Banks & Salmon, 2013) and identity exploration (Merrill, Waters, & Fivush, 2016). Together, these studies illustrate how growth from experiences with positive valence is favorable in terms of both well-being and a good life story, even though the focus is primarily on negative events.

In both negative and positive event studies, an in-depth examination of the experience itself was necessary to identify key elements of the experience that led toward growth following the event. This approach is well suited to identify growth from a range of experiences but has yet to be employed to study one that may be both positive and negative: prosocial behavior. The

current study provides balance to the literature on growth from specific events by including an equal focus on the positive through looking at high points and low points of prosocial behavior.

The importance of growth themes may be particularly relevant for old age. In an extensive review of narrative studies, Park and Bauer (2010) interpret findings from various studies relevant to aging and demonstrate how even aging individuals use growth themes when narrating both past events and future goals. In many studies, older adults were more likely than younger adults to narrate growth memories and growth themes were more common than loss. In a qualitative study on community-dwelling older adults, Reichstadt and colleagues (2010) found that older adults most commonly designated “personal growth” as one of two main components of aging well. One line of research has looked at growth in old age as a result of a particular event: becoming a grandparent (Shlomo, Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler, Sivan, & Dolizki, 2010; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Shlomo, & Findler, 2012, 2014; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler, & Shlomo, 2012). This research has demonstrated that growth as a result of this overall positive event is common, and that age is associated with higher scores of personal growth (e.g., Taubman-Ben-Ari, Shlomo, & Findler, 2012). Taubman-Ben-Ari argues that such positive experiences can be growth inducing in that they involve challenge in addition to positive affect.

Bauer and Park (2010) articulate the importance of growth narratives in old age in the context of resilience. They argue that growth narratives in older age facilitate “eudaimonic resilience,” the ability to adjust, regulate, and maintain both affect and meaning. This is important for well-being in later adulthood as it may be able to temper the inevitable biological losses associated with aging. As physical capacities diminish and retirement transitions begin, the importance of regulating affect, and maintaining and creating meaning, become increasingly important. The ability to interpret experiences as growth-promoting remains and is one capacity

that can transcend physical limitations. The growth need not be as a direct result of a loss experience but interpreting the self as having grown from an experience in old age serves the important purpose of providing a sense of meaning and progress despite losses in other domains.

The types of activities that facilitate particular kinds of personal growth are not well understood. However, Aristotle's conception of eudaimonic well-being designates virtuous behavior as paramount and as the action through which one becomes a better person and lives in a eudaimonic way. Following this idea, prosocial behavior constitutes a good candidate for personal growth given that it is inherently virtuous. Bauer and Park (2010) assert that growth narratives can involve strengthening in the prosocial domain, but the extent to which individuals grow from prosocial experiences has yet to be empirically examined. Interpreting growth from a specifically virtuous activity such as prosocial behavior could mean that one is on a trajectory toward eudaimonic well-being. Next, we review the benefits of prosocial behavior and consider how growth in older age may be derived from such behavior.

### **Prosocial Benefits in Later Life: Potential for Personal Growth**

Prosocial behavior in older adulthood has been a fertile area of research. Research has consistently shown that the likelihood to engage in prosocial behavior increases with age, making it a topic of particular interest during this developmental period (Midlarsky et al., 2015). Prosocial behavior in older age represents a way to remain engaged while simultaneously giving back to society. Beyond the benefit of remaining engaged, many studies have uncovered positive outcomes associated with such behavior (Piliavin, 2003). Given the inevitable declines and challenges introduced with age, it is important to understand how prosocial behavior might protect against or ease decline. An examination of empirical research is warranted in order to understand the nature of these experiences and how one might be impacted by such behavior in

adulthood. Although prosocial behavior often encompasses any activity for the benefit of others (Midlarsky & Kahana, 2007), we focus here on doing good for others in the context of an organization, such as formal volunteering, as it is typically more consistent and elective than informal volunteering (Burr et al., 2005).

The benefits of prosocial behavior for adults are both physical and psychological. In terms of physical health outcomes, studies have found formal volunteering to be associated with better perceptions of physical health (Fried et al., 2004; Van Willigen, 2000), less hypertension (Burr, Tavares, & Mutchler, 2011), less pain (Arnstein, Vidal, Wells-Federman, Morgan, & Caudill, 2002), better physical functioning (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005) and delayed mortality (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Luoh & Herzog, 2002; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999). A smaller body of research has also demonstrated improvements in cognitive and mental health such as increased executive functioning (Carlson et al., 2009) and reduced rates of depressive symptoms (Li & Ferraro, 2005, 2006). Various forms of well-being including life satisfaction, positive affect, subjective well-being, and happiness have also been found (Baker, Cahalin, Gesrt, & Burr, 2005; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Hunter & Lin, 1981; Thoits & Hewitt 2001; Van Willigen, 2000). Meaning and purpose in life also seem to be bolstered by prosocial action (e.g., Greenfield & Marks, 2004). These benefits are particularly important given that older adults experience decline in cognitive abilities and physical health with age; prosocial behavior seems to be part of a path toward aging well both mentally and physically.

One glaring gap in research on the benefits or the impact of prosocial behavior on older adults involves the impact on identity or how one perceives to be changed by the behavior. Evidence from studies on younger populations demonstrates how giving back has proven to be beneficial in terms of identity development and self-perceptions (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus,

2012; Hardy, Bhattacharjee, Reed, & Aquino, 2010). Personal growth from prosocial behavior is such a prominent issue for youth that often service programs are designed with the explicit intention of fostering personal development (McIntosh, Metz, & Youniss, 2005; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Perhaps because identity is so commonly viewed as a concern for the young (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Erikson, 1968), such issues receive less attention on older populations. Scholars have pointed out that there is substantial literature devoted to issues of growth and personal development from prosocial behavior for the young, but these issues are “essentially ignored” when it comes to adults (Piliavin, 2003, p. 241). These issues are important to consider in older adulthood, especially given that the new challenges associated with aging can require a self-reassessment/identity challenge (Randall, 2015).

A small set of studies using older adult samples are relevant for issues of identity but primarily focus on social and career roles. Research on role transition finds that volunteering after retirement facilitates a re-direction in career self-concept as opposed to a loss of career sense of self (Cook, 2013). These studies do suggest a shift in self-perception through adjusting to new roles given new circumstances, but do not explore a change in identity as a result of behaviors.

Research on moral exemplars has uncovered much about the personalities of highly moral individuals. In a groundbreaking qualitative study on moral exemplars, individuals committed to moral causes (e.g., social justice), Colby and Damon (1992) uncovered elements of a moral identity that included positivity in the face of adversity and a dynamic interplay of change and stability throughout the life course. Specifically, they found that moral exemplars maintained a consistent openness to growth while remaining committed to their moral endeavors. They attribute change to social influences and although they did not assess whether the

exemplars grew directly from their moral commitments, their findings suggest that growth may be highly possible from moral exemplars' prosocial engagements in later life. They also emphasize the importance of the relation between the self and morality, designating it as crucial in understanding sustained moral commitments.

One study does shed light on the possibility that older adults may view themselves as having personally grown as a direct result of volunteering. In a qualitative study on intensive volunteering as a part of a religious group, Piercy and colleagues (2011) found that volunteering offered an opportunity to reflect on one's life and personal values. Participants often designated personal change in a number of ways, indicating that they had more compassion and authenticity, and were less materialistic and selfish. In addition, they were better attuned to the important things in life and many participants considered the overall experience to be "life-changing." Findings from two qualitative studies of Taiwanese volunteers above the age of 60 echo these, demonstrating that volunteering was considered a "turning point" for many, and that individuals saw positive changes in personal qualities such as wisdom, patience, expressiveness, and friendliness (Chen, Chu, Lin, & Yang, 2007). These findings suggest that positive identity development in older age can be a direct result of prosocial behavior, as well as suggesting a possibility of finding narrative growth in these endeavors. These studies provide the first step toward understanding the potential of growth from doing good, but the specificity of both samples puts generalizability into question. More importantly, these studies do not answer questions regarding how individuals were able to derive growth from such experience and how these experiences differ from those that were not perceived as growth-inducing. Taking a narrative approach builds on these studies by capturing specific types of growth as well as key

features of the experience. However, narrative research has not explicitly studied prosocial behavior in this way.

The narrative studies concerned with prosocial behavior have primarily focused on identifying personality characteristics or qualities of those who engage in such behavior, as opposed to the impact it has on the self. Extant narrative research pertaining to prosocial behavior includes studies looking at features of the moral personality. Using his 3-level model of personality, McAdams (2006, 2013) argues that the moral personality is reflected in highly generative adults whose life narratives share common features such as early advantage, awareness of suffering and stable moral codes. Another stream of moral narrative research coded the life narratives of moral exemplars for common narrative themes and found that compared to matched samples, moral exemplar narratives had more themes of agency, communion, and redemption (Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, & Riches, 2011; Matsuba & Walker, 2005; Walker & Frimer, 2007). Communal values have also been shown to predict moral behavior (Frimer & Walker, 2009). Some researchers have found differences between types of moral exemplars. For example, one study used cluster analysis to determine three personality profiles of moral exemplars: communal, deliberative, and ordinary (Walker, Frimer, & Dunlop, 2010).

These studies allow for a rich understanding of moral exemplars' narrative identities, but the extent to which moral endeavors themselves impact the creation of the identity remains largely unexplored except for a few studies that have examined moral narratives within the life story (Krettenauer & Mosleh, 2013; Pratt, Arnold, & Lawford, 2009). Krettenauer and Mosleh (2013) coded moral memories for self-relevance or connection to current self and found that age and greater moral motivation were related to more self-connections in moral narratives. This study exemplifies how specific narratives regarding moral concerns can and are sometimes



integrated into one's sense of self. Further, the findings that older adults are more likely to draw connections from past moral experiences to the current self suggests that growth from moral behavior is possible even into adulthood. Yet the focus has been on *who* draws the connections as opposed to a closer look at *how* growth experiences in the moral domain are understood.

Two studies have looked specifically at narratives of “giving back,” but in adolescent samples (Cox & McAdams, 2012; Singer, King, Green, & Barr, 2002). Both studies found evidence of personal growth in service narratives among college students and linked growth in the context of giving back to future community service and volunteerism. This aligns with theorizing about a bi-directional relationship between moral action and moral identity development, such that engaging in such action might facilitate becoming a better person (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). As discussed earlier, honing in on specific stories such as these allow for a fine-tuned understanding of how context-specific stories are integrated into an overall sense of self (Dunlop, 2015, 2017; McLean et al., 2007). Extending this approach to older populations would allow for a better understanding of how giving back directly aids in identity development.

One reason for the lack of understanding about growth and development resulting from prosocial behavior in older adulthood may be because of the focus on growth as the result of negative experiences or trauma. Because prosocial behavior is generally considered positive, the potential to enable growth is overlooked; especially for aging populations given the traditional assumption that growth is not happening in later life. Although giving back may be considered positive in terms of the outcomes as well as for its enjoyable qualities, the endeavor is not without challenge. Especially when considering long-term prosocial commitments, there are many obstacles including funding, effectiveness, and bureaucratic delays, among others.

Tedeschi and colleagues (2007) argue that the impetus for growth is in the challenge associated with the event that causes one to re-examine core beliefs. Given that prosocial behavior is not simply positive but requires effort and involves setbacks, it may still foster personal growth despite the overall positive valence. This is demonstrated in the previously discussed study where growth was derived from the positive experience of grandparenting (e.g., Taubman-Ben-Ari, Shlomo, & Findler, 2012).

Further, there is evidence to suggest that under certain conditions, prosocial behavior may have a negative impact on well-being. For example, Windsor and colleagues (2008) found that time spent volunteering had an impact on positive affect. Specifically, those volunteering at higher rates experienced more frequent negative affect relative to those volunteering at moderate levels and non-volunteers. This suggests that the experience of volunteering, especially at higher rates, may be a multifaceted experience, which could potentially impact the positive outcomes typically associated with volunteering. It will be helpful to explore both the positive and negative features of extended volunteering in order to evaluate when it may lead to growth and when it leads to contamination. The potential to grow from prosocial experiences exists, but there needs to be more knowledge about these experiences in order to understand when growth is derived and how it is fostered.

## **Summary**

To summarize, framed by modern theories of aging, the current knowledge base of development in adulthood is beginning to include positive aspects of growing older. Growth is now considered a feature of aging worth exploring. Narrative studies offer a method through which growth may be assessed, and allow for a rich understanding of how specific events impact the self. These studies have generated a wealth of data demonstrating how narrating one's life

with themes of growth is beneficial, especially in terms of eudaimonic well-being and in particular for older populations (Bauer & Park, 2010). Research considering personal growth as a positive, direct connection between an experience and the self has uncovered some specificity in understanding growth themes from particular events (Pals, 2006a). However, the focus has been on generally negative events, despite evidence that positive events may foster growth as well (e.g., Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Shlomo, & Findler, 2012). The current study uses these methods to sharpen the understanding of experiences that facilitate growth and should provide a more balanced understanding by examining events that are considered positive, or both positive and negative. A closer look at growth from specific events is of particular importance for aging populations, when time and resources are limited. Understanding what types of events are most beneficial in later life can clarify for individuals and institutions where their time and resources would be most effectively spent.

One experience worth considering is prosocial behavior, given its virtuous nature and dual benefit for society and the self. A significant proportion of the aging population is engaged in such behavior and empirical research has shown it to have physical, psychological, and social benefits (Midlarsky et al., 2015). Extensive research has addressed benefits of such behavior using quantitative scales with a predetermined set of options, but the way in which these experiences impact the self is not yet known. Narrative methods would be well-suited to answer this question by uncovering the extent of the impact these endeavors on the self. The possibility of growth themes in narratives of prosocial behavior may constitute an optimal experience of prosocial behavior: one through which benefits of both the behavior and perception of growth are derived for society and the self. Identifying consistencies in narratives of prosocial growth through examining highs and lows of the experience, in contrast to prosocial stories without

growth, will shed light on when doing good for others could be a path towards growth in older age, and thus eudaimonic well-being.

In conclusion, the literatures on personal growth and prosocial behavior in adulthood convey the unequivocal benefits for both the aging self, as well as society. Taken together, an examination of these literatures to better understand their benefits highlights two gaps in knowledge: little understanding about specific episodes that are growth-inducing, and the impact prosocial behavior has on the self. The current study serves as an exploration of prosocial narratives to understand if and when they can be growth stories, which will accomplish the goal of addressing both gaps, while identifying how prosocial behavior may be an optimal activity for the aging population. A better understanding of growth from prosocial contributions can help maximize the benefits of these endeavors for individuals, and inform the creation of structures aimed at facilitating growth and thriving in older age.

### **The Current Study**

The current study uses a narrative framework to assess the impact of prosocial behavior on the self, and identify shared characteristics of prosocial narratives that lead toward perceived personal growth. The study utilizes data from interviews with older adults about their prosocial endeavors in later life. The individuals in this sample have engaged in continued prosocial commitments over time, allowing for an assessment of how sustained prosocial behavior can impact the self, as well as enabling a look at specific events within the story of the prosocial commitment. Narratives pertaining to personal impact as well as specific events within the prosocial experience (e.g., high points and low points) were all coded.

First, personal impact narratives were coded for types of impact, and importantly, personal growth. Personal growth will be used as a basis for comparison in the rest of the

analyses. Next, high points and low points will be examined for common elements. Unifying themes among narratives in the personal growth group will be contrasted with those in the non-growth group to characterize prosocial experiences from which growth is derived. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, specific hypotheses will not be delineated. The broad research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1: Do prosocial behaviors result in personal change and growth in older adulthood?

Research Question 2: What are the specific types of perceived impact on the self from prosocial behavior?

Research Question 3: What are the shared characteristics of prosocial growth stories as evidenced by prominent episodes (e.g., high points and low points) within the story?

The current project aims to shed light on each of these three broad questions through an in-depth qualitative narrative analysis.

## **Chapter II. Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

The data for this project comes from a larger project, funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation and Encore.org to Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which explores moral exemplars in later life. Participants were sampled from 521 social entrepreneurs in the second half of life who were winners and fellows of the Encore.org Purpose Prize from 2006 to 2014. The 521 winners and fellows were categorized by gender, education, geographic location, and year awarded. We intentionally selected based on these criteria to create a diversified sample, and had a high response rate of over 80%. Those who declined to be interviewed did so for various reasons including being unavailable during the designated timeframe or were simply unwilling to participate. A national sample of 13 Purpose Prize winners and 34 Purpose Prize fellows participated in interviews for a total of 47 interviews. Of the 47 participants, 46% were female, and the mean age was 69.6 years ( $SD = 5.2$ ) at the time of the interview. Twenty seven percent of the interviewees had a doctoral or professional degree, 35% had a master's degree, 23% had a bachelor's degree, and 15% had a high school diploma or GED. The sample included residents of 29 different states. Participants were contacted through Encore.org to take part in a 90-min semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted in-person ( $n = 20$ ), by videoconference ( $n = 25$ ) and by telephone ( $n = 2$ ). All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and uploaded into ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development GmbH) to be coded. ATLAS.ti was used to create output files for the interview excerpts of interest to this study, but coding was done primarily outside of the program.

### **Interview Narratives**

For this study, a number of questions were extracted from a larger interview protocol aimed at understanding the story of social contribution in the second half of life.

**Prosocial event narratives.** The prompts used to solicit key scenes from the participants' prosocial involvement were designed based on McAdams' (2008) life story interview (LSI) but were modified to pertain specifically to prosocial involvement, an approach effectively used in the relationship domain (Dunlop, Harake, Gray, Hanley, & McCoy, 2018). Two key scenes, a high point and low point, were used to capture the story of the program. The prompt used to assess high points is presented below:

Take a moment to think about the story of your experience with the project since it began, up to now. There are probably particular "stand-out moments" for you. First, please describe an event that stands out as particularly positive, in your experience. This particular event may be thought of as the high point in the story of the project, or an especially happy, joyous, exciting, wonderful, or meaningful moment. Can you please describe the event in detail?

1. What happened, when and where, and who was involved?
2. What were you thinking and feeling at the time? Why was this particular event so good?
3. How has this event impacted you as a person?  
If the event changed them, probe how: Can you explain how it led you to change?
4. Does this event say anything about you as a person or about who you have become?

The prompt used to assess low points was asked immediately following the high-point question and is as follows:

Now, I would like to ask you about an event that is opposite to the first. Please describe a specific event that stands out as an especially negative or difficult experience. It doesn't have to be the worst event in the story of the project, but it may be.

This prompt included the same four probes as the high-point prompt.

**Personal impact.** Responses to two questions were used to directly assess the overall personal impact of the program on the self. The first asked "How, if at all, has the project changed you?" This question was based on probes and measures used in narrative studies after

the description of a key scene to assess the self-integration or self-relevance of the scene (Bauer, Graham, Lauber, & Lynch, in press; Mansfield et al., 2015; McAdams et al., 2006; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2011). The second question asked, “What are the intended or unintended outcomes of the program for you, personally?”

### **Coding Procedure and Analysis**

The coding involved both inductive and deductive approaches. An independent coder was given established protocols used in narrative studies (e.g., Bauer et al., 2004b) as well as protocols developed specifically for this study through multiple coding passes. The coder was trained to code each type of narrative for a number of variables. Reliability was calculated after each coder had independently coded 10 interviews to make sure reliability was at a sufficient level. Each coder then continued to code all interviews independently and the final reliability was calculated based on all interviews. Any coding disagreements throughout the process were resolved through discussion.

The initial round of coding involved multiple coding passes on the responses relevant to self-change. First, responses to the impact questions were coded for presence (1) or absence (0) of positive or negative change in the form of a direct impact on the self. Narrative studies have used this type of coding of causal connections or self-event connections to assess the development of the self as a result of particular events (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2015; Pals, 2006a, 2006b; Pasupathi Brubaker & Mansour, 2007). Although this type of coding has sometimes been called *growth*, we differentiate *change* from *growth* in this study by using a stricter definition of growth as a more meaningful form of self-development (Bauer et al., 2004b). Narratives were coded “0” when the narrative explicitly designates that no direct change in the self has resulted from their prosocial involvement in the program. Narratives were coded “1” when there was



clear evidence of any change resulting from the program. Uncodable narratives included (a) those that do not specifically address the question, and (b) those that mentioned change but explicitly attribute the change to something other than prosocial involvement.

Next, responses coded “1” for change were coded for growth based on Bauer’s (2004b) protocol for narrative growth coding. Growth was defined as a deeper, more meaningful change that goes beyond personal improvement (e.g., gain in power or status). We coded for general growth that included both (a) socio-emotional growth involving how one feels and acts, as well as (b) intellectual growth involving how one thinks about oneself and the world. Growth was given a code of “1” when the narrative involved gaining a deeper felt experience of one’s life, improved knowledge, exploration, or learning about one’s life or others (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2010). Each narrative was coded “1” for presence or “0” for absence of growth. These codes were then used to define the groups for comparison in the next phase.

The next coding pass was the first of the open coding phase. In order to capture the nuance in types of change or self-relevant connections, this pass involved open coding of the impact questions for emergent themes or categories of change (e.g., physical, cognitive, emotional, skill, virtue). These categories were refined and used to provide rich description in reporting the variety of ways individuals perceive themselves as having changed. The categories generated will be reported in the results chapter.

Phase two involved the coding of key scenes (i.e., high points and low points). The author approached the data inductively and engaged in open coding to assess similarities and differences in the stories of key scenes. Initial coding of key scenes involved identifying what types of events participants discussed for both high points and low points in order to generate categories of events for each type, respectively. The next pass involved an examination of both

structure and content, with particular attention paid to valence, positive resolution, emotional content, self-relevance, and processing. The goal of this phase was to identify general themes across the stories and in particular, determine unifying themes characteristic of the stories of those who grew versus those who did not. Once a consistent pattern emerged, a protocol for focused coding was established. Once again, a second coder was given the resulting protocol and trained to code for the themes and processes extracted. The specific codes generated are reported and explained in the results chapter.

Finally, narratives were organized into a classification based on type of impact (growth vs. no growth). The shared characteristics of each group will be discussed.

### **Chapter III. Results**

Results are organized according to the guiding research questions of this study. The change and growth coding pertaining to the first research question were coded according to established protocols which represent the deductive portion of the study. The rest of the codes reported resulted from coding schemes created specifically for this study from inductive analysis involving several iterations and refining of protocols.

#### **Personal Change**

Research Question 1 asked whether narratives of prosocial behaviors result in change and growth in later life. To answer the first part of this question, an initial phase of coding involved coding personal impact narratives for self-change as a result of involvement in the social program. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa and acceptable consistency was achieved (Cohen's kappa = .918). We found that 32 narratives (68%) included change, 7 (15%) did not include explicit change, and 8 (17%) were deemed uncodable as they did not include information relevant to the question or explicitly attributed the personal change to something other than their prosocial involvement. This change coding aligned directly with self-event connections. The types of change are reported later as they pertain to Research Question 2.

#### **Growth**

To answer whether narratives of prosocial behavior involved growth, the personal impact narratives were coded for growth themes. Coding revealed that there are indeed growth themes in narratives of prosocial behavior in later life and that nearly half of all narratives had growth themes (Cohen's Kappa = .843). Specifically, we found that 23 (49%) narratives had themes of growth, 16 (32%) narratives did not have growth, and 8 (17%) narratives were deemed uncodable. Table 1 shows examples of each code.

The growth coding was used as a grouping factor for unifying themes in later analysis. In order to better understand who comprised each group and to bolster the ability to attribute differences in key scenes to having grown as opposed to other demographic characteristics, we conducted a descriptive analysis of demographic variables based on these groups (Table 2). Differences in demographic characteristics between groups are relevant when interpreting the results. The groups were similar on age, gender, education level, and ethnicity (Table 2). However, the mean age at the start of the program for the growth group ( $M = 55.39$ ) was significantly lower than the non-growth group ( $M = 60.69$ ),  $t(37) = 2.74$ ,  $p = .01$ .

### **Types of Personal Change**

An inductive dive into the data revealed a number of consistent themes across responses coded positively for change. An initial list of codes was created and refined through multiple iterations. Following the creation of an initial list, it was clear that many of the types of change reported fell into categories characteristic of virtues, or morally valued personal qualities. For this reason, Peterson and Seligman's (2004) list of virtues was used as a guide for those responses that aligned with change in the form of gaining a moral virtue. Peterson and Seligman's work involved drawing from multiple disciplines (religion, philosophy, and psychology) to identify six universally accepted core virtues under which they could classify multiple character strengths that could be measured. We used their description of the six virtues at the broader level as a framework and the ways in which each virtue manifests in the data are reported below. The other changes that emerged fell into meaningful subcategories but there was not an existing framework unifying these changes and therefore the protocol for these codes was generated exclusively from the data. Inter-rater reliability for the primary codes was acceptable with Cohen's kappa ranging from .72-.76.

The resulting sub-categories for virtue were transcendence, wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, and temperance. The other positive improvement categories included hard skills (public speaking, financial planning), empowerment (confidence, pride), social standing (increased social network, connections), states (hedonic happiness, peace, pride), validation (recognition, approval), and one category comprised only negative changes (cynicism, intolerance, distrust, stress). Frequencies and descriptions for each can be found in Table 3.

Responses sometimes referred to more than one type of change. Accordingly, we coded each narrative for all of the change types mentioned, but designated one as the primary change based on the one that was most strongly emphasized. Seventy-five percent of participants ( $n = 25$ ) who said they changed designated more than one type of change. For example, an individual may have described acquiring wisdom in addition to a hard skill such as public speaking. The ways in which individuals changed were not limited to one and went beyond that which would be expected from prosocial behavior.

**Virtues.** Overall, a change in virtue was mentioned 42 times. Descriptions of each kind of change are below.

***Transcendence.*** Peterson (2006) defines transcendence as a quality that “allows individuals to forge connections to the larger universe, thereby providing meaning to their lives” (p. 154). This was the most prevalent category mentioned 16 times overall, 10 of whom designated it as the main way in which they changed. Change in this virtue was characterized by “getting outside” of oneself to focus on others and more important concerns. For example, one participant discusses how he has changed via transcendence:

The major satisfaction is getting outside of yourself and giving back and being a part of other people’s lives in a positive way. So that’s – and that’s changed me even more here,

because you really get out of yourself and get involved in other people's lives in a very deep and meaningful way. And I – most people don't have the opportunity to do that. So it's – uh, it's changed me in that aspect, getting out of myself and getting more into other people and into the community – into the community and the system as a whole. And to help that.

Participants also often discussed how they now had more meaning in their lives or had discovered their purpose, often conveying a transformation of the self. For example, one participant responds to the change question by saying the following,

So it's given me meaning and fulfillment much beyond what I ever expected. Pure and simple. Because it is – it is a – a calling that has transformed my life as much as it's transformed the lives of our participants and other volunteers. . . it's promoted a – a well-being that perhaps I would have never achieved had I just sort of shuffled off into retirement. And, uh, as I talk about that, it – it has been – it has changed. It's – it's been, uh, something that I never would have anticipated, but I certainly am very much grateful that this happened and that I became involved because it's given true meaning to that portion of my life as – as I go into the sunset.

Other participants discussed a union of their values and action, exemplified by one participant explaining how she was able to unify her beliefs and actions:

I was having a battle with the secular world versus my – my secular life versus my spiritual life, and doing this brought those together. Where my work is connected to my spiritual journey and my spiritual life. And that's the biggest difference. . . because it didn't have the meaning and the spiritual aspect, and I think I was pulled to this because it's the two things together. So I'd say the number one thing is that my – my work and

my spiritual journey are overlapping. There's pieces of this that aren't, you know – you do a balance sheet, whatever. It's not exactly a spiritual act – but, but the meaning behind it is – so that's the biggest difference.

***Wisdom/knowledge.*** This virtue is defined as “positive traits related to the acquisition and use of information in the service of the good life” (Peterson, 2006, p. 142). This was the next most common category mentioned 11 times with eight participants designating it as the main way in which they changed. Many of these responses involved an increased understanding of themselves and of the world. For example, one participant directly mentions a change in thinking, “It totally changed the way I think about the world, woke me up to be a better man.” He goes on to say how he is much more in-tune with social issues. Another participant talks about becoming “a lot more sensitive to why people do what they do,” and learned to respect why adults make decisions for themselves and their families, that it comes from “deep inside.” One participant directly talks about becoming wiser and elaborates by saying,

I've learned quite a bit of things in terms of, uh, just not knowledge but awareness and understanding of how life works. And what life is all about. Life skills and what it means to be a human being and all that kind of thing. Those kinds of things. I never thought about that at 35. What – what am I? I'm a spiritual being and I'm connected to everybody else in the world.

Participants in this category also talked of becoming more open-minded to new ideas and perspectives they hadn't previously thought of or adopted. One participant says he became “less ready to be dogmatic and ever ready to consider that there might be a different way, might be a different way to do this.”

**Courage.** This virtue is considered an “exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal” (Peterson, 2006, p. 143). Courage was mentioned five times and it was the primary virtue for two cases and involved becoming braver to reach out and interact with people for a purpose or to pursue bold ideas. For example, one participant describes a new boldness in approaching people to ask them about their health for a good purpose. In addition, this was characterized as having the ability to become closer to one’s true, authentic self without being afraid. One participant described having the courage to maintain his independence politically throughout this endeavor and how it has made him a “stronger, better person.”

**Humanity.** The virtue of humanity is an interpersonal strength that involves what Taylor and colleagues (2000) call “tending and befriending” others (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). Six narrative in total had themes of humanity and two had it as their primary type of change. Narratives coded for humanity involved becoming a more kind or empathetic person towards others, or having love for all. Sometimes this happened in conjunction with gaining wisdom or knowledge in the sense that one had the realization that they should become a more empathetic person but emphasized both a new view or way of thinking and the humanistic concern of empathy or love.

**Justice.** Peterson and Seligman (2004) define justice as “civic strengths that underlie healthy community life” (p. 30). This code was not designated as a primary code by any respondent, however, it was mentioned as a secondary code twice. This involved a greater focus on equality and leadership in order to accomplish an important, other-focused goal.

**Temperance.** This virtue is broadly defined as “positive traits that protect against excess” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30). This virtue was not the primary code for any but was a



secondary code for two cases. Temperance involved an increase in patience or the ability to regulate oneself.

**Other Positive Improvement.** There were eight cases whose primary change was not classified as “virtuous” but involved other types of positive gain, and this category was mentioned as a secondary theme 22 times. The three most prevalent types were confidence, social orientation, and validation, each with two cases. *Confidence* involved a heightened belief in one’s capabilities or self-assurance. This type of change was designated in a relatively straightforward way, for example, “I’m a much more confident person than I used to be.” One participant was even surprised at this type of change, “Um, this is going to sound really odd. But I’ll just go ahead and say it. Actually, it’s given me a little confidence” and another conveyed how this change was unexpected just by saying “that surprises me.” A change in one’s *social standing* included an expanded professional network, more valuable connections, or becoming more well-known. One participant designates a number of social changes by saying “Its improved my social circle, business circle, and international exposure.” *Validation* involved a focus on having more recognition and accolades as a result of their involvement with the program. For example, one participant says the program has had a “big impact” on him and immediately explains “It’s gained me recognition. It’s actually, uh, been something that people thank me, for founding an organization like this. I don’t personally feel that it’s something big or unusual that I’ve done, but at the same time, they appreciate what I’ve done.”

The positive improvements that were mentioned less as primary codes were hard skills, cognitive abilities, and hedonic happiness, peace and engagement. *Hard skills* involved becoming better at public speaking or financial tasks and accounted for one primary case and another secondary. *Cognitive abilities* included becoming more “focused” and having a

sharpened memory. This was the primary code for one case and a secondary for three. *Hedonic happiness* was a general designation that one had become more satisfied or happy, but did not provide a reason. This was a simple designation of feeling affectively better. For example, one participant mentions happiness and designates the cause as enjoyment, “I think I’m a happier person significantly than I was, simply by virtue of enjoying what I do” Although this change type was not ever primary, it did serve as a secondary code for 6 cases. Peace and engagement each were cited as a secondary code twice; the former involved an explicit designation of feeling more content and peaceful, and the latter with being more actively engaged or involved with life. For example, after mentioning other changes, one participant adds, “I – it’s also, you know, kept me very sort of engaged with life. I feel like I’ve got something important to do every day. I look forward to it, most days.”

**Negative Change.** The *negative* change category comprised any response that denoted a change that was not an improvement or neutral but objectively un-favorable. This category was mentioned as a primary change twice and secondary four times. It was comprised of instances in which one became more cynical, less willing to foster relationships, or in one case, more “intolerant of sloppiness.”

We compared the virtue codes with the growth codes and found substantial overlap between the two categories. Specifically, all but one case in the growth group had a virtue as their primary change, and none of the non-growth cases had virtues as their primary change type. This was found despite the fact that the virtues comprised a truly emergent category that happened to map on to Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) list of virtues, and that growth was coded using a pre-established protocol (i.e., Bauer, 2005). The coding phases were independent, but the results nonetheless indicate that the type of “growth” that occurs as a result of prosocial behavior

pertains to specific virtues. The growth group's changes were not limited to virtues only, as nearly half (10) of the cases also mentioned other types of positive improvement, whereas only one case within the non-growth group mentioned a change in virtue in addition to their primary change. These findings unify two different conceptual frameworks and will be discussed later.

### **High-Point Categories**

To understand the types of events that represented high points and low points of a social commitment, we conducted an inductive analysis with a focus on the kinds of events that emerged when discussing high points and low points. We found six different event types in the high points and low points, respectively. Interestingly, categories that were mirror images of each other emerged. The category breakdown can be seen in Table 4. Coders reached an acceptable Cohen's kappa of .785.

**Successful case.** The most prevalent type of high point was "successful case" with 19 instances (49%). This involved personal or general stories about when program participants were helped by the program's services. This manifested in a number of ways including stories about witnessing the objective progress of program participants first-hand, hearing about how a participant had been transformed by the program, and annual ceremonies where successes within the program are showcased.

**Support.** The next most prevalent event type was labeled "support" with eight instances (20%). This involved funding from outside sources in order to run the program, approval by state or local officials or important stakeholders in the issue, and even the approval of family members or friends about the program's mission or the individual's commitment to the prosocial endeavor. This was more focused on external approval than internal successes.

**Successful program.** This category constituted five instances and pertained more to program-level issues. These were stories focused on an organizational element of the program and included accomplishments at the organizational functioning level as opposed to elements concerned more with beneficiaries or support from outside.

**Recognition.** Four cases were characterized as being about recognition. These involved getting praise and accolades for the prosocial endeavor. This often included the receipt of prestigious awards or acknowledgement of one's contribution from someone powerful. This category involved a focus away from the beneficiaries and staff of the program and toward the narrator's own achievement.

**Successful staff.** Only one case described a successful staff story. This involved program-level issues that pertained to staff members. This was characterized by occasions when staff members exceeded expectations or were instrumental in the program's functioning. This involved successes more specific to the organization as a whole, as opposed to individuals who benefited from the program.

Two cases were labeled "other" and were narratives that talked about less common event types such as reflecting on the issue of the program or forming connections with people unrelated to the program.

### **Low-Point Categories**

Event types for the low points were also encapsulated in six categories that appeared to be the mirror-image of the high-point categories. For example, the "successful case" category is mirrored by an "unsuccessful case" category in the low points. Each category in the low points has an opposite in the high points and no disconnected categories were found. Low-point

categories are reported below in the order of most common to least common. Cohen's kappa was acceptable at .784.

**Lack of support.** This was the most common low point with 10 cases. These cases involved individuals or organizations that declined to fund or advocate for the program or simply did not believe in its ability to be successful. Often these stories included strife and disbelief that others were not willing to share the same vision.

**Unsuccessful cases.** Eight cases involved times when program clients were unable to be helped by the program. This included instances in which the participant attempted but failed to help another and those that were out of the participant's control and the client chose to leave the program.

**Unsuccessful staff.** Seven cases were times when staff members failed to live up to expectations. These involved betrayal on the part of members of the organization, mismanagement of funds that resulted in termination, or simply failure to perform according to program standards.

**Opposition.** This category was represented in six cases and was a more extreme version of unsupportiveness in which the individual encountered targeted efforts of another individual or group to sabotage or cancel the program. This was characterized by an overt effort from an external party to shut down the program.

**Unsuccessful program.** This constituted five cases and characterized an array of problems at the organizational level. This involved failed attempts at opening new branches, glitches in an organizational process and poor functioning of the program as a whole.

The "other" category was comprised of cases that did not fit in the above category and only included three instances.

Given the mirror-image pattern between high points and low points, we did a comparison and found that fifteen cases had low points that were the exact opposite of the high points.

We compared the growth and non-growth groups to determine whether some categories were specific to one group as opposed to the other, however the breakdown of categories did not meet the assumptions for Chi-Square tests of independence and therefore the results of that analysis are not reported. The percentages follow a similar pattern across groups, although, there was a greater percentage of “recognition” high points for the non-growth group (19%) as opposed to the growth group (4%), more “opposition” low points for the growth group (22%) than the non-growth group (6%), and a higher occurrence of unsuccessful staff low points for the non-growth group (31%) versus the growth group (9%). Table 4 shows the frequencies and percentages by group.

For the sake of further comparison, the categories were collapsed into three larger groups: External (support, lack of support, opposition, recognition), Internal (successful/unsuccessful program, successful/unsuccessful staff), Beneficiary-focused (successful case, unsuccessful case), and “other.” External can be seen as issues involving entities outside of the program and may be uncontrollable. Internal issues have to do with the actual functioning of the program itself and have more to do with organization-level concerns. Beneficiary-focused, on the other hand, may be the result of program functioning but pertain more to those served by the program and are stories that had more person-focused elements.

The growth and non-growth groups were compared using these larger categories. Beneficiary-focused stories were the most common category in both groups with over half of the high points in the non-growth group (52%) falling into this category and slightly less in the growth group (44%) but still the most common. The groups followed the same pattern with

External concerns being the second most common and Internal the least. For low points, External issues were the most common for the growth group (48%), whereas Internal issues (56%) were most common for the non-growth group. The growth group's next most common was Beneficiary (26%) followed by Internal (13%) and Other (13%). The second most common category for the non-growth group was External (31%) followed by Beneficiary (13%).

### **Integration**

To address Research Question 3, an inductive analysis was conducted on both the high-point and low-point narratives. The initial objective of this analysis was to identify themes that were specific to the growth group. A random sample of the growth cases were read and coded for several emergent themes. Next, a sample of cases within the non-growth group were read and analyzed for the same codes. A number of salient themes composed one category—integration—and a protocol was designed to code integration in both high points and low points.

This code was completely emergent with no frameworks from past literature used as a guide in constructing the protocol, in contrast to the virtue codes discussed earlier. Thus, it represents a new phenomenon identified through the data in this study. The protocol was given to another coder who was blind to the groups. All narratives were coded by both coders and an acceptable Cohen's kappa was achieved (.788). Looking across both high points and low points, integration was characteristic of 23 cases. The manifestation of integration in both high points and low points is reported below.

Overall, integration was defined as a nuanced, multi-faceted understanding of the significant points as not just simply “good” or “bad” but both. Integrative stories included a combination of positive and negative elements to comprise one story, conveying a perception that each significant episode (i.e., high point or low point) involved both good and bad elements,

whether it was a story of going from negative to positive or acknowledgement of negative in a high point, or explicit focus on the positive in a low point. They were often rich stories and indicative of a deeper understanding or processing of the story. These stories explicitly or implicitly highlighted the understanding that significant experiences are not exclusively positive or negative.

### **High-Point Integration**

High points coded for integration were not simply stories of something pleasant occurring. Rather, they were filled with perspective, balance, and/or understanding that the good instances happen in light of bad instances or are not without negative aspects. There were two main types of integration in high points: (a) *negative acknowledgement* and (b) *transformation*. Interrater reliability was acceptable (Cohen's kappa = .743). Integration was coded in 20 high-point narratives.

*Negative acknowledgement* involved a balanced perspective of a story throughout. For example, one woman explicitly addresses the positivity and negativity when asked to talk about a joyous moment,

Let me just share one moment to you which is both positive and negative. OK? Which is, I mean, in a certain sense, it illustrates for me, um, that kind of balancing thing I was talking about before, or the half – glass half full and glass half empty. And it's always kind of – even the most positive moments, I've had the sense of what – of what more could be there that wasn't... it sort of captures the bittersweetness that's always been part of this work for me. Um, and, um, the complexity of it makes me feel intellectually challenged and – but emotionally challenged in all kinds of good ways.



Many were careful to have a realistic, integrative view of positive memories as good but not without acknowledging the seriousness of the issue they aimed to ameliorate, “when you say joyous, there is nothing about this that is joyous. We’re feeding hungry children... and that was exciting. Not joyous, again, but definitely exciting.” Another characterized the outcome as important but not necessarily good, “You know, you don’t feel good. You’re on – it’s like, you know, you’re helping – it’s like you’re helping somebody through major surgery. You’re not feeling good. You’re just – are hoping that they’ll survive.” Others talked of feeling happy but acknowledged that there are lows along the journey as well.

So this – relapse is a part of recovery, so people always – don’t always jump from here to here. You know, it’s going to be – it’s like the stock market. You’ve got up and down and major dips and you’re up, but hopefully, in the long run, you’re higher than you started out with.

The other type of integrative high point was *transformation*. Transformative stories or those that were characterized as moving from a negative to a positive were stringently coded, and stories that may otherwise be coded for redemption did not necessarily reflect integration. Given that these programs are aimed at ameliorating social issues, they were inherently more likely to have stories of negative to positive. Therefore, a fleeting reference to negativity for context or an assumption of redemption based on knowledge of the population (e.g., the success of an underserved student) was not enough to be coded as integration. Rather, there needed to be an emphasis on the negative or challenge or transformation that went beyond just providing context. For example, in discussing high points, one woman whose program involves donating cars to those in need brings up the negativity of the challenges, “You felt so defeated all the time” then goes on to emphasize how important the redemptive stories are because those are the instances

that change lives, “there are so many wonderful experiences of giving out cars. You know, just so many – every car we give out is joyous, but there are so many that really stand out – that totally change somebody’s life.” She goes on to describe several “moving” examples of when one person went from homelessness to getting their master’s degree, and others’ whose lives were saved by getting out of domestic violence, each time emphasizing how the “goodness” was in light of the negative place from which they came. Another participant talks about learning how transformed one of his clients was and focuses on how the program transformed him into a new person who may have not survived otherwise.

Some chose to tell a story that could have been characterized as negative, but they were able to find something so positive out of it that they considered it a high point:

But it’s funny because some of the times, something negative would happen, but something positive would come from it. So I learned that you don’t always know the reason why you’re meeting some of the people, and it may not be for the reason that you hoped or thought, but that if you were open, that something else would come.

### **Low-Point Integration**

Similar to high points, integrated low points were not simply negative stories but involved an integration of negative and positive as well. The two main types of integration in low points were (a) *positive emphasis* and (b) *positive outcome*. Inter-rater reliability was achieved with Cohen’s kappa = .835. Fourteen low points were characterized as having integration.

The positive emphasis type involved a perspective on the low points as being in light of the positive happenings or aspects of the program. The coding for this was especially stringent as well and fleeting references to “it’s not all bad” or “so that’s a lift” were not enough to warrant

an integration code. Rather, narratives required a positive emphasis throughout. Many participants introduced their low points as being infrequent with statements like, “Well the good news is we don’t have very many negative stories.” and “As I said, I could name a lot of high points.” Participants were apt to reframe the low points as challenges with quotes like “I look at them as bumps... those are bummers, but they’re not devastating” and “it was just a problem, and I’m all about solving problems. So here’s a problem. Ok, we’re going to solve that problem and here’s what we’re going to do, and move it right on.” In addition, there were a number of instances in which participants would shift focus from the low point by discussing examples of positive events. Participants did not fail to acknowledge that negative instances do occur, they instead wanted to make it clear that the negativity was in the context of something positive and could not be understood in isolation as simply a negative event.

There were many examples in which participants discuss the low point then are quick to mention how even though difficult, it did not deter them. For example, one woman talked of the difficulty of running the program in the face of opposition but ended with saying:

And I think the positive things that I saw in the prison with the inmates and the volunteers kept me going. I knew in my heart that this was a positive thing that would help people, and so I think that offset it. And I – I’ve never – my belief in the process never wavered.

Another echoes this sentiment by talking about a “*heartbreaking, devastating*” event in which a child was shot and killed, but concludes by saying,

I have no doubt in the future, if we continue to evolve as a society in the world, that we will reach back and touch people at the earliest point possible. And a few might end up in [program] and that’d be the dream, if not the vision.

More simply, others acknowledge the negativity but emphasize the forward-thinking determination, “But, so that can be disappointing. But that doesn’t stop me. It’s like, OK, I’m done with that. I’m over it” then goes on to discuss a current positive happening.

The other main type of integration in low points was positive outcome. This involved a story in which there was a positive outcome that directly resulted from the low point. This is different from positive emphasis in that participants chose to tell a story that actually ended up positive, as opposed to shifting focus to a different positive theme or not mentioning anything positive at all. For example, one woman discusses how an emotional event in which a child internalized being incapable of learning was “stunning and shocking” and how they “sat around and cried. . . but that led us to the resolve that we were going to fix this. And we started a charter school.” She directly connects the events by saying “So— the [low point]—story set us on a path because we always try to grow and change.” Another discussed an event in which a disgruntled donor prompted the local news to do an expose on the participant’s program but once they were interviewed the news story “got turned around, fortunately” and transformed into a positive review of the program. She characterized it by saying, “But something good actually came out of that as well. And that’s why I’m saying you just have to hold on.”

One very common story for positive outcome involved instances in which a low point turned positive in how it prompted determination, renewed motivation to tackle the issue, or an important lesson. One participant states that the low point “clarified my mission, it strengthened my mission and tested my faith in the process. It – I became more entrenched and more determined to, uh, do what I could to make it work. It strengthened me.” Another discussed how it reminded her of the importance of the program and said because of the low point:

I’m more determined to work it through. It’s like – this is my vision. This is my purpose.

And this brings meaning to my life, and I believe it's my purpose in life, is to really start to have this to grow and expand. So I'm more determined to work on this in spite of what people think or what people say in terms of funding it. So it's just – like I'm more determined.

The motivation of some was even fueled during the event itself, "I was angry and annoyed... but I tell you the other thought that came to mind and suddenly I was a fighter", which set in motion an immediate initiative to tackle the problem. Aside from becoming more motivated, other participants learned valuable lessons. One talks of how she learned an important lesson in management and said, "It has certainly as big, if not a bigger, impact than the best event that ever happened. Because I explained how that really had a fabulous impact going forward that I still use today. She characterizes the low point as integral to the success of the program, "So it was a valuable lesson to learn, and one that I had to learn if things were going to survive, obviously."

Similar to high points, there was also a general designation of events as being both positive and negative, or connected. One participant in response to the question stated,

These labels negative and positive are of our own making. How we perceive that part. Like a, give you an e.g, I face problems every single day working there. It's my choice to label them as negative and be depressed, or I can say, "Well, here's another facet I need to deal with. Something that I did not know." So I generally don't tend to label events, however hard they may be, as negative. Because as an electrical engineer, I learned pretty early in life, the negative charge does not stand by itself. There has to be a positive charge somewhere else. OK? So if I have a lot of negative surges one place, that means there is another place there's – where there's a lot of positive charge.

Another talked about the connectedness of events,

So, you know, the pot– the high notes are with people and the low notes are with people. .  
. so wow, it's all one. It's all connected. So what then becomes important is for us to  
figure – for me, is to figure out how I am connected to everything else.

### **Integration Prevalence**

Overall, the sample consisted of 23 integrated cases and 16 non-integrated cases. Of the 23 integrated cases, 11 cases had integration in both the high point and low point, nine had integration in only the high point, and three had integration only in the low point. Because we were interested in features of stories within the growth group specifically, we conducted Chi Square tests of independence for comparison (Table 5). Integration was significantly more likely to be found in the growth group (87%) than in the non-growth group (19%),  $X^2 (1) = 18.143, p < .001$ . Integration in high points specifically was also more likely in the growth group (74%) than in the non-growth group (19%)  $X^2 (1) = 11.493, p = .001$ . Finally, the likelihood of integration in low points was also higher in the growth group (57%) than the non-growth (6%) group,  $X^2 (1) = 10.363, p = .001$ .

### **Supplementary Analysis**

A combination of both positive and negative valence was inherent in the emergent integration code, which prompted a question of whether this code was simply reflective of positive and negative emotionality within narratives, or if it was descriptive beyond emotional variability. To answer this question, we conducted an emotion analysis of emotion word counts within high points and low points using Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) technology (Pennebaker , Booth, & Francis, 2007). This program analyzes frequencies of words within several categories including pronouns, tone, and affect. We used the LIWC internal dictionary 2015 to analyze the frequencies of emotional tone, as well as positive and negative affect. We

examined differences between the growth and non-growth groups for overall counts within both narratives, as well as each high point and low point individually. In a series of t-tests, we found no significant differences between groups in overall emotional tone,  $t(37) = 0.01, p = .992$ ; positive affect,  $t(37) = -0.13, p = .89$ ; or negative affect,  $t(37) = 1.15, p = .26$ . In order to be more stringent on emotion words included in analyses, we created a dictionary of discrete positive and negative emotions based on lists of discrete positive emotions (Graham et al., 2019) and negative emotions (Ekman, 2011) and corresponding emotion words found in the narratives during the qualitative analysis. These mean comparisons also proved to be non-significant.

## **Chapter IV. Discussion**

This study represents an initial effort to explore personal change and growth as a result of extended prosocial behaviors. Overall, the findings shed light on the prevalence and types of change and personal growth found in narratives of prosocial behavior, the content categories of high points and low points, and the integrated way in which high points and low points are narrated for those who perceived growth from the experience as a whole. These findings add an important dimension to the perception of personal growth and change in later adulthood, contribute to literature on successful aging and the benefits of prosocial endeavors in later life, and clarify growth from prosocial behavior as frequently involving an integrated perspective of positive and negative features.

### **Personal Change**

This study revealed that a majority of those engaged in extended prosocial commitments make causal connections between the endeavor and their current self. Narrative studies consider causal connections a mechanism through which self-making happens or as evidence that particular events are integrated into a sense of self (Pals, 2006; Pasupathi & Weeks, 2011). Prior to this study, research had rarely examined the extent to which events that occurred in older age were incorporated into one's sense of self despite the theoretical designation that narratives are constantly revised throughout the lifespan (McAdams & Olson, 2010). These events were not simply a reflection of the self, providing identity stability and continuity, but often they were transformative in the sense that they fostered a change in one's sense of self. The finding of change alone, despite being from prosocial behavior, demonstrates how self-making in older adulthood does not consist only of re-interpretations of memories from the distant past, but also an incorporation of more proximal events into one's identity.



The prevalence of this effect (70%) was considerable given that it falls between percentages characteristic of younger adults (76%) and older adults (46%) found in other studies examining narratives from across the lifespan (e.g., Mclean, 2008). This finding supports the notion of plasticity in later life and specifically applies it to concerns of identity, one area that may be overlooked in older adulthood due to the dominant view of identity as a more salient concern at younger ages (Erikson, 1968). However, even Erikson considered identity to be a life-time project. If studies privilege age differences when concerning identity change versus stability, they lose the ability to capture the changes that are occurring in later adulthood as a result of recent experiences. The focus of change narratives during youth is likely compounded by a lack of studies examining specific narratives such as proximal experiences in adulthood or domain-specific events.

Change in older adulthood may be less of a concern for older adults (Rice & Pasupathi, 2010), but that does not preclude it from happening. Accordingly, the stability found in the life story in older age (Kober & Habermas, 2017) does not suggest lack of change, but may be due to increased biographical salience due to a lifetime of repetition during which the memory becomes solidified and engrained into a story schema (Anderson, Cohen, & Taylor, 2000). Older adulthood affords more memories to choose from, making it reasonable that the recited significant memories will be called forth in lieu of more recent happenings. Although stability in older adulthood may be favorable in light of the changes associated with older adulthood, the same could be said of a sense of further identity development to prevent a sense of stagnation which is related to lower well-being (Levinson et al., 1978). This study sets the stage for future studies to consider change and development in later life a topic worth exploring. Future studies

focusing on proximal events in adulthood and across adulthood will shed light on how identity changes, however small, occur in later life.

Personal change directly attributed to prosocial behavior situates this domain as one through which development in later life can occur. Previous research has designated identity-relevant domains in the narratives of young adults and demonstrated how these matter for identity development (McLean, Syed, Yoder, & Greenhoot, 2016). One study found causal connections in moral narratives of younger populations (Krettenauer & Moles, 2010). Our study extends this to older adulthood, finding prosocial behavior to be an identity-relevant domain in older adulthood through causal connections. The incorporation of domain-specific events, especially prosocial events, into one's identity in later life may help maintain a sense of identity during a developmental period typically characterized by inevitable loss and challenge (Randall et al., 2015). This study aligns with theorizing that prosocial behavior may be especially important as other social roles are lost during retirement, which poses challenges to one's identity in later life and the threat of disillusionment (Greenfield & Marks, 2004). The ability to fluidly incorporate proximal experiences into a sense of self may depend on the types of activities one chooses to do, with prosocial behavior having the potential to foster such beneficial outcomes. These findings suggest that prosocial behavior may be an avenue through which identity challenges characteristic of older age may be successfully resolved.

The change occurring in later life pertaining specifically to prosocial behavior furthers research on successful models of aging by suggesting that the *type* of engagement one chooses may be an important consideration for the types of changes one may incur. It is important to note that not all changes are favorable, nor do they always contribute to a "better" self. In order to understand those that do, we turn now to growth.

## **Growth**

One of the primary goals of this study was to examine the potential for personal growth from prosocial endeavors in later life. We found evidence for personal growth in nearly half of the narratives analyzed. Although the evidence of growth was not a surprise, the prevalence is somewhat greater than expected in light of previous studies that found growth in about one third of all narratives (Bauer et al., 2018; Bauer et al., 2005; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). It is possible that this higher rate corresponds to the greater number of growth themes found in generative samples (e.g., McAdams, 2006) or the openness toward growth found in moral exemplars (Colby and Damon, 1992); however, there was no reason to expect this for narratives of prosocial behavior, specifically. Nevertheless, the presence of growth in older age contributes to a growing understanding that growth does indeed occur in later life (Baltes, 1987; Bauer & Park, 2010; Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 2012), and importantly, that it can be attributed to prosocial behavior.

The prevalence of growth from prosocial behavior is particularly important in light of eudaimonic well-being. The findings of this study in conjunction with previous work that has revealed a connection between growth themes and eudaimonic well-being (see Bauer et al., 2008, for a review) suggest that prosocial behavior might serve as a pathway towards eudaimonic well-being. The established link between growth and well-being may be particularly beneficial in later life when changes in circumstances and abilities may present threats to leading a meaningful life (Bauer & Park, 2010).

The finding of growth from prosocial behavior contributes to the understanding of the ways in which prosocial behavior may be beneficial. Past research has shown that prosocial behavior contributes to a number of beneficial psychological, social, and physical outcomes (see Midlarsky et al., 2015, for a summary), but the perceived impact on how one views the self goes

beyond what has been found using pre-determined scales. Whereas studies examining younger populations have focused on growth as a beneficial outcome of prosocial behavior (Piliavin, 2003), this study represents the first to look for evidence of such growth in the narratives of older adults. That prosocial behavior may lead to a positive, meaningful change in one's sense of self establishes this behavior as a potentially optimal activity in later life, especially for those who are seeking to continually become better people. It is known that prosocial behavior has benefits to society, the beneficiary, and the self, and this study elevated growth as a viable concern in studies examining prosocial behavior. That prosocial behavior actually leads to a better perception of the self underscores the importance of knowing when such growth occurs by examining specific behaviors, which will be discussed later.

### **Virtue and Change Types**

The data revealed a variety of types of changes within and across participants. Most participants designated at least two ways in which they changed, demonstrating that perceived change is not limited to one type, but a variety of changes are found in most narratives.

Some of the change types echoed previous research which found increases in satisfaction, confidence and cognitive abilities as a result of prosocial behavior (Midlarsky et al., 2015). However, the discovery of themes of virtue in the change narratives was an unanticipated finding. We did not expect to use a virtue framework to organize the change types, but this emergent and prevalent sub-category suggested that unifying them under "virtue" would be both descriptive and informative. Although our original intention was not to look specifically for categories of change within the growth group, the finding of virtues in our inductive analysis did reveal an almost complete overlap of growth themes and virtues. This bears on both the character strengths framework and the study of personal growth which explore considerations of "the good

life” separately and suggests that fundamental elements within each conceptual framework converge when studying the impact of prosocial behavior.

It is possible that the established concept of personal growth has great overlap with virtue, or perhaps the type of growth derived from these endeavors just happens to be virtuous given that it is virtuous behavior. It is not a given, however, that one will grow or change at all, let alone in a virtuous way. The overlap makes sense in light of the fact that the previous research we used as a guide defines growth as personally meaningful self-development, which requires more than just simple self-improvement, like becoming more physically fit because of material concerns of beauty and status (Bauer et al., 2005). However, it is possible that personal growth according to this definition need not be morally virtuous. For example, a growth in one’s curiosity about a certain topic and wonder about the world need not be morally beneficial to others. For simplicity, we will discuss the implications for the growth found in this study in conjunction with the inductive finding of virtues. Future studies might seek to tease apart the types of growth derived from specific types of activities and directly examine concepts of personal growth and virtue together to determine the extent of the conceptual overlap.

The development of virtue as a result of prosocial behavior can be understood as a demonstration of Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia—that becoming more virtuous requires virtuous activity, in this case prosocial behavior (Cahn, 1990). The fact that these individuals naturalistically articulated personal changes in virtuousness as a direct result of prosocial behavior suggests that although virtue may have led them to engage in such behaviors, the activity has allowed them to become even better people. This personal betterment as a result of virtuous behavior encompasses the type of life Aristotle believed to be reflective of the good life, or eudaimonia. This aligns with more modern theorizing that moral behavior can cause one to

become a better person beyond the current moral action they are engaging in (Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Empirical research focusing on young populations also supports this notion with acts of kindness interventions creating an “upwards spiral” (Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016), volunteerism leading towards high likelihood to volunteer later (Cox & McAdams, 2012), and a bi-directional relationship between moral identity and prosocial behavior (Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014). Our findings align with these and extend this phenomenon to older adulthood, clarifying that virtue development as a result of prosocial behavior can extend well into adulthood.

Why these virtues developed as a result of prosocial behavior can be explained by appealing to the logical connection between the behavior and virtue. As discussed above, prosocial behavior is virtuous behavior in the sense that it is morally favorable to help other people. It makes sense that engaging in moral behavior would lead to the further development of a moral personality, given that the behavior represents an expression of morality, or moral practice. Research shows that moral identity is a strong predictor of moral behavior (e.g., Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007), however, this could be due to the fact that those who have a moral personality have already engaged in moral behavior which helped to solidify their moral identity. Indeed, some scholars do hold that the development of moral identity is partially dependent upon the opportunities for moral behavior afforded (Hart, 2005). Our results suggest that although the individuals in this sample may have been virtuous or moral before, they have become even more so as a result of extended practice in moral action through prosocial behavior. This further supports Aristotle’s notion that in order to become good, one must do good.

The virtue findings are interesting to consider in light of different domains of behavior. It is possible that the types of changes resulting from prosocial behavior are domain-specific and

that changes within other domains would correspond more directly to the type of activity with which one is engaged. For example, the type of change from work endeavors may be more focused on the acquisition of hard skills, education on learning abilities, and prosocial behavior yielding change in virtue or the moral domain. This aligns with the notion of variability in narratives based on specific domains and contexts (Dunlop, 2016, 2017) as well as the argument that growth from specific experiences may produce differential positive outcomes (Mansfield et al., 2015). However, the extent to which personal *changes* align with the domain or context of interest is unknown. Future studies might seek to examine narratives across domains to see whether the types of emergent changes are a reflection of the activity, context, or person.

The cultivation of virtue or acquisition of virtues in older adulthood is not a widely studied concept in adult development. In contrast, the expression of virtues through “character strengths” has enjoyed much attention in younger populations (see Heintz, Kramm, & Ruch, 2019, for a meta-analysis). These character strengths are primarily considered personality characteristics or qualities, the further development of which is dependent upon identifying which strengths you possess and exercising those strengths. Our findings do not dictate that one already possessed the virtue one acquired, but do shed light on how such actions might facilitate the development of virtue in later life. The emergent coding system developed in this study might be used as a platform for future studies considering the development of virtues in later life. In light of the current debate on the validity of self-report measure in studies of virtue (see Snow, 2019, for a discussion of measurement issues), the narrative analytic methods might provide a fresh interpretative avenue through which such an amorphous topic may be studied.

Growth and increase in virtues in older age is important when considering Erikson’s (1968) final stage of development: ego integrity . Erikson’s theory conceived of older age as a

time when one reflects on one's life as a whole and determines whether or not it has been a worthwhile, successful life. This largely depends on the extent to which one lived a "good, productive" life, which may be dependent on the ability to act generatively during the previous developmental period. The cultivation of virtue and further development in later life suggests that those who garnered these benefits from prosocial behavior would likely successfully resolve this primary developmental concern of older age. The number of wisdom-related changes in our data bolsters this idea as Erikson especially highlights wisdom and insight as constitutive of the best of older adulthood along with care and ethics (Erikson, 1968; Vaillant, 2006). The increased wisdom as a result of caring (prosocial) behavior maps directly on to Erikson's theory and represents an elegant connection between the two final stages of development through satisfying the need to be generative via prosocial behavior, and acquiring the tools necessary (wisdom) from the same behavior to resolve the concern of ego integrity. It stands to reason that prosocial endeavors in later life may be dually beneficial for satisfying the developmental concerns of both stages in later life.

The occurrence of these activities in later life poses an interesting consideration of whether such behaviors saved those who would have otherwise looked upon their life as a failure from such despair had they not participated in these virtue-growing activities. It is possible that the prosocial behavior in later life served as the differentiating factor that ultimately lead to satisfaction with one's contribution. Alternatively, it is possible that those who choose to be so committed to such endeavors are already quite virtuous and may have engaged in a successful self-reflection in later life even without involvement in formal prosocial endeavors. Regardless of the degree of virtue already attained, further development of virtues in later adulthood should increase the chance of having a positive life review at the end of one's life.



## **High-Point and Low-Point Categories**

The types of high points and low points found in this study shed light on what kinds of challenges and successes are most salient when working toward the social good. The majority of stories were about times when participants were able to see the benefits of their work on those they serve. Previous research has differentiated prosocial behavior aimed at individuals versus an organization and found differential effects on job satisfaction (McNeely & Meglino, 1994). Further, scholars suggest that witnessing those who benefit from the endeavor maximizes the experience of prosocial impact, or the feeling that one is actually making a contribution (Grant, 2007). Our findings align with these and highlight the importance of activities that focus on the beneficiary. High points were often accompanied by a phrase like “this is what keeps me going” and used as fuel to continue such demanding work for the sake of others. This suggests that although volunteering can sometimes involve isolating and mundane tasks, seeing one’s work come to fruition through the beneficiaries may be a motivating and sustaining factor that allows one to continue and potentially grow. Creating opportunities that remind one of the good one is doing seems to be integral in facilitating motivation and positive experiences.

Whereas the high points primarily involved beneficiaries, the most frequently cited challenges were lack of outside support, sometimes even opposition, or problems with the inner workings of the program mechanics such as inability to sustain a branch of the program or process problems. That is, rather than reflecting commonalities in the high points, the most frequent low points were a step removed from the beneficiaries. It is worth noting that none of the categories involved age-related losses, contrary to what one might expect given that cognitive and physical decline are well-documented challenges in older age (e.g., Manton, 1990; Tucker-Dobb, 2011). The low point findings complement what we gleaned from the high points by

adding that beneficiary focused endeavors not only constitute good experiences, but infrequently are called to mind as bad experiences.

The largest percentage for both the growth group and the non-growth group was the same for high points with a focus on the beneficiary. However, the most frequent low-point category for the growth group was external concerns whereas the non-growth group most commonly cited internal, program-related obstacles. It is interesting that those who faced more opposition or to whom it was salient enough to mention were still able to grow. Our data suggest that external challenges may be the impetus for growth. The frustrations of the non-growth group align with previous literature that suggests that program-level elements are related to volunteering satisfaction (Morrow-Howell, 2010). The fact that this was a less salient issue for those who grew suggests a few different possibilities: that the program elements were not a problem because there were few, or that those who grew were more concerned with the support of external entities. It falls to future research to determine whether external challenges are better facilitators of growth, or if these differences are indicative of salient experiences for those who grew.

The variety and types of high points and low points have implications for narrative research. Typically, narrative studies focus on themes and structural elements within narratives of discrete episodes (see Adler et al., 2016, for summary of commonly used narrative variables) but less on more straight forward elements like characters and the type of story being told. Those that have classified stories into types have found differences in the meaning narrated in certain types (e.g., relationship stories) versus others (e.g., leisure stories; McLean & Thorne, 2002; Thorne, Mclean & Lawrence, 2004). This variation based on event-type should be taken into consideration by studies aimed at understanding particular domains of experience (e.g.,

prosocial, work, leisure). Narrative studies can incorporate these additional variables to better understand the nuance of narration and how different stories may be told with different themes.

## **Integration**

One of the major aims of the study was to examine when prosocial behavior might be a pathway towards growth by examining narratives of high points and low points of the experience. The most salient, differentiating factor between the growth group and non-growth group was a novel concept we termed “integration.” Integration involved a nuanced, multi-faceted understanding of the significant points as not simply good or bad, but both. This was characterized by having evidence of both negative and positive valences in either a high point, low point, or both, indicating a complex understanding of the events. The novelty of this finding can be understood by discussing typical narrative studies of discrete episodes.

Previous studies have held the event valence constant (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005, Pals, 2006b) and assumed positivity in a high point and negativity in a low point, or used average valence across events as a control variable (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011) preventing the ability to examine the nuance of intertwined negative and positive dimensions. The overwhelming majority of studies are focused on growth from negative events, and past research may have obscured the ability to find that growth-promoting interpretations of events involve *both* positive elements in low points *and* negative elements in high points. This is important to consider when making assumptions about what type of event is most likely to lead towards growth, given that this data suggests it is not necessarily discrete positive or negative events but ones that include an overall balanced tone. Whether this is specific to narratives of prosocial behavior in later life or can be generalized to activities across domains is a question to be answered by future studies. Narrative studies need to consider valence overlap in discrete episodes when examining the

impact of positive or negative events. The assumption that a high point is without negativity and low point without positive elements is dangerous in that it prevents uncovering a distinguishing characteristic of narratives related to growth.

This phenomenon is interesting in light of research pertaining to valence in later life. In particular, research suggests that older adults have a “positivity bias” in that they are more likely to have a positive evaluation of past experiences (e.g., Kennedy, Mather, & Carstensen, 2004). A general “positive outlook” despite adversity was also found in an in-depth qualitative study of moral exemplars (Colby & Damon, 1992). Although we did not compare narratives across age, the blending of positive and negative is contrary to what one might assume to be characteristic of older age. It is possible that the realistic interpretation of such events is favorable in a context in which there is undeniable negativity given that the behavior would be irrelevant if there were not people in need. Not acknowledging the suffering of those one is attempting to help would negate a need to help in the first place and potentially insinuate a mis-understanding or minimizing of the issues at hand. Literature on resilience supports learning to cope with negativity throughout the lifespan but does not promote ignoring negative elements altogether (Ong, Bergeman, & Boker, 2009). Accordingly, these findings suggest that a healthy understanding of both the positive and negative elements together could facilitate growth.

The complex interplay of both positive and negative suggests a thoughtful and acquired understanding of the experiences likely attained through engaging in reflection on important episodes from the prosocial experience. In the narrative literature, autobiographical reasoning constitutes a process through which the self is constructed through an understanding of events (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Integration could be a product of the type of reflective autobiographical reasoning necessary to facilitate perceived growth. The

finding that the growth group had significantly more years of participation bears on this reflective component as longer involvement means more time for reflection.

The ability to generate positive and negative scenes at all suggests a realistic outlook on a multifaceted commitment such as extended prosocial behavior. Although one intends on aiding the needy and likely experiencing some type of reward, the reward is not isolated from the fact this experience only exists because social issues exist and need to be resolved. The juxtaposition of positive and negative within single events shows that individuals who perceived an overall self-growth can interpret events as being both positive and negative. Growth is not exclusive to positive events or negative events and one can expect both to be intertwined.

One relevant topic in the aging literature involves affect and emotion at later stages of life. The literature on such topics has found compelling evidence for more complex emotions (e.g., Ready et al., 2010), mixed-emotions (Grossman, Oaks, & Santos, 2019), and a general decrease in negative affect. One may posit that “integration” in the growth sample is a reflection of such phenomena in later life. However, integration was not just a proxy for overlap of positive and negative emotions. In our supplemental emotion analysis, we found no differences in positive, negative, or emotional tone. This suggests that the narrative analysis of integration involves something deeper than positive and negative emotion, and involves an adaptive incorporation of both negative and positive aspects into discrete episodes within one’s life.

Finding integration in the low points aligns with previous research on growth from traumatic or negative experiences. A blending of positive and negative could be seen as analogous to the element of autobiographical reasoning deemed “positive resolution” that has been found to be characteristic of post-traumatic growth (Pals, 2006a, 2006b). This aligns with research that has found that elements of reflection on negative events lead towards growth

(Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Similarly, the type of low-point integration that involves reframing or focusing on other positive events aligns with literature on resilience. The finding of integration in high points provides balance to the literature on growth from negative events. Specifically for high points, this research suggest that growth is related to instances in which positive is understood in light of the negative. The positive force of the high points perhaps sustains motivation, but commitment and salience of the issue does not waiver.

Taken together, the fact that valence integration was characteristic of both high points and low points and together comprised this phenomenon characteristic of growth has implications for the way research treats discrete events. The assumption that events are exclusively positive or negative does not capture the range of possible combinations. One can look toward the affect literature as an example with the move toward measures that do not view positive and negative affect as mutually exclusive (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001). Although the present study was more concerned with valence and tone as opposed to affect, the inclusive approach this literature has taken can be applied to narrative research.

Exactly how integration is a pathway towards growth requires theoretical reasoning. It is possible that overall positive events (such as prosocial behavior) are pathways towards growth when they involve challenge (Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2012; Tedeschi et al., 2007). It is also possible that it is not necessarily positive, or negative events that lead towards growth, but those that are complex enough to have both positive and negative elements require added processing and a re-evaluation of the self. This effect may only be characteristic of prosocial behavior but is worth exploring in a larger sense. Overall, growth comes from a mosaic of experiences. Reflecting on a long-term commitment and seeing the good and bad as intertwined in significant events propels one toward a deepened understanding of the world and oneself in the form of virtue.

## **Limitations**

The findings of this study should be understood in light of several limitations. A strength of this study was an in-depth analysis of a particular, exemplary group in order to understand extended prosocial commitments. However, the results must not be overstated, and the limitations of this choice must be well understood.

First, exemplar studies are not meant to be generalizable to the entire population as a whole. What we found in this study applies to those who are involved in extended prosocial endeavors in the second half of life. In order to understand such specific experiences an exemplar sample is favorable. However, the extent to which the findings apply to the general population as a whole is in question and remains to be examined. Given that these individuals represent the higher end of prosocial participation, it is possible that the characteristics found in their narratives are specific to this sample alone. Future studies should replicate these findings in populations with standard levels of volunteerism to see if the findings hold. In addition, the focus of this study was on when these endeavors result in growth, and therefore the basis of comparison was within the sample. However, without a comparison sample of those who are engaged in more normative rates of volunteering or none at all, we are unable to definitively say whether the characteristics found in these narratives are specific to this exemplar population alone. Again, future studies aimed at differentiating exemplar patterns from normative patterns should consider including a comparison sample in the design.

Narrative research relies on the ability of individuals to reflect and generate thoughtful responses on how they have changed across time, but this does not mean that the relationships are necessarily causal. The data was collected at one time point and the possibility that having grown caused one to become more thoughtful and thus narrate a story with integration is

possible. Narrative studies examining causal connections depend on the participants' ability to accurately report whether or not they changed as a result of an event, and what is of interest is often not confirming whether they changed but the *perception* of a change which means something on its own. Regardless, without a longitudinal design, we cannot be certain about the directionality, whether integrative experience cause growth, or growth causes one to interpret experiences as integrative. Future studies should seek to determine the direction of causality through longitudinal designs.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

There are several implications for this study. In terms of methodology, the novel way in which the story of prosocial behavior was studied provides a foundation for future studies. Adding to the budding examination of narratives within specific domains, the adaptation of life story interview questions to the prosocial domain proved effective in eliciting the overall impact of a long-term commitment as well as features of the experience that may have led toward growth. Future studies might seek to adopt this approach and apply it to an array of domains to compare across types of experiences. In particular, studies employing mixed-methods might find this approach useful and feasible in conjunction with scale measures, given only three questions are required.

The results from this study call for the inclusion of several overlooked variables into conceptions of lifespan development. Findings pertaining to personal growth warrant the inclusion of personal growth and changes in identity as a part of the myriad of ways older adults may continue to develop as a result of behaviors in older age. Although positive aging models like the lifespan perspective suggest that personal growth is possible in older adulthood, this study presented viable evidence that it should be included in discussions of plasticity in older



adulthood and may be promoted through prosocial engagement. Along the same lines, the predominant focus on identity change as a concern specific to the young might be extended to incorporate the ways in which such changes happen in older populations, even if they look different or are less prevalent. Future studies would benefit from examining growth from prosocial behavior across ages as well as the differential ways one might grow in older age as a result of different domains of behavior.

The finding of integration has implications for studies examining discrete events. Narrative studies in the past have solicited high points and low points assuming the valence is held constant (e.g., Pals, 2006b). The blend of positivity and negativity in those who grew suggests that this dichotomy may miss an important interpretative element that leads towards growth. The oversimplification of narration of high points and low points would benefit from a more fine-tuned examination of how these experiences are understood by examining integration. Future studies might seek to assess both the differential emotions as well as the variety of valences mentioned within a single episodic memory. In all, a more balanced perspective including growth in aging populations and examination of events with a blend of positive and negative would enable further understanding of these phenomena.

The implications for eudaimonia should be understood in light of the different ways of conceptualizing eudaimonia and both the virtue categories and growth. Modern measures of eudaimonic well-being vary as it is sometimes considered an orientation, experience, level of functioning, and an active way of life (Huta, 2016). The findings from this study support multiple notions of eudaimonia. If eudaimonia is seen as a current level of functioning to be assessed using a scale of psychological well-being, then prosocial behavior likely leads to such well-being, as growth themes consistently relate to these measures (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005). If

eudaimonia is to be considered an active way of life that expresses virtue, the moral aspect of the behavior already qualifies; and even further the increased meaningfulness and feeling more virtuous aligns with the conception of eudaimonia as an experience. Regardless of which conception of eudaimonia one adopts, the findings from this study suggest that deriving personal growth and virtues from prosocial behavior support the notion that prosocial behavior can be an eudaimonic activity, lead towards eudaimonic growth, and foster eudaimonic functioning. These findings provide a foundation for studying activities that align both with modern eudaimonic conceptions and with Aristotle's original conception of eudaimonic development requiring virtuous behavior. Future studies might benefit from an examination of multiple conceptions of eudaimonia within one study to identify consistencies and determine which events align most closely with eudaimonic well-being. It is possible that some activities, such as prosocial behavior that fosters virtuous growth, might constitute an ultimate eudaimonic activity.

One practical implication from this study involves awareness of what to expect when pursuing extended prosocial endeavors in later life. Individuals or organizations should first and foremost acknowledge that there are both joyous moments and challenging moments. The majority of the high points involved witnessing the good created through seeing the success of their beneficiaries, emphasizing the importance of being afforded such opportunities. Programs aimed at creating positive prosocial experiences should incorporate regular opportunities for individuals to directly see the fruits of their labor. For example, although there are many roles one might take on in a volunteer organization, allowing regular exposure to beneficiaries or organizing regular events in which progress can be celebrated and showcased might provide an important positive experience for volunteers. This may be especially important for those whose roles require them to be relatively removed from seeing the people the program helps. The lack

of low points involving beneficiaries further signals how these experiences are likely to be sources of joy and less likely to be significantly frustrating, and should be prioritized.

The relationship between integration and growth can take on an important meaning for those aimed at developing optimal prosocial opportunities. Although it may not represent a direct implication in the form of creating experiences that are both good and bad, it does have importance in terms of the reflection it implies. In order to have this complex, multi-faceted understanding of the inter-related positive and negative aspects of a memory, it is likely that these participants more deeply processed the events they chose to narrate. Programs aimed at facilitating this sort of reflection that could lead toward growth through integration might incorporate a regular reflective component into the structure of the program. For example, asking program volunteers to regularly think about the high points and low points might initiate the deeper sense of perspective and integration that may lead towards growth. More deeply considering the elements of the experiences and how one has been affected overall could be the key to promoting an optimal growth experience from prosocial behavior. At the very least, individuals should understand that there will be highs and lows, and to consider the intertwined nature of both. Expectations that such behavior will not always be bad or good, but at times both should lead to a sound understanding of the experience and foster meaningful development.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrated how change and growth can happen in later life as a result of prosocial behavior, and of the ways in which individuals grow. It contributes to an understanding of plasticity through personal growth in later life and when growth is derived through prosocial behavior. The results challenge the notion of older age as a time of identity stability and stagnation, and calls for inclusion of personal growth through prosocial behavior into models of

aging. The types of growth uncovered in this study demonstrated the widely held belief pertaining to eudaimonia—that good behavior leads to becoming better. Results from this study demonstrated when an already worthy endeavor in later life is most optimal through growth, which is contingent upon an integrated understanding of events as both positive and negative. A better understanding of personal growth in later life, and of pathways toward becoming better through prosocial behavior, can inform the creation of programs and individual endeavors that are poised to have a lasting impact on society, others, and importantly, the self.

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Table 1.

*Illustrative Quotes for Change and Growth Coding*

Narrative Code			Code Category	
		Change		Growth
	Frequency	Quote	Frequency	Quote
Present	32 (68%)	It's made me a better public speaker than I thought I could be. Um, I now am at a point where I can walk in a room and be asked to come to the podium and – and speak for a few minutes with no notes. That surprises me. Um, I guess. I would have been nervous about that in the past. But nervous on the way up to the podium – as soon as I start talking I have confidence.	23 (49%)	It totally changed the way I think about the world. It woke me up to the better man – it made a better person out of me, I'll say that. Made me much more aware as to social issues.
Absent	7 (15%)	It really hasn't much changed, because I'm going back to being a part of that entrepreneur back when I was out of the village here. And that hasn't changed. I'm still the – I still, you know, try to communicate with men that need help. It hasn't changed.	16 (34%)	And, uh, so it's – it's been a big impact on me. I've gained recognition. It's actually, uh, been something that people thank me, for founding an organization like this. I don't personally feel that it's something big or unusual that I've done, but at the same time, they appreciate what I've done.
Uncodable	8 (17%)	--	8 (17%)	--

Table 2.

*Comparisons of Groups on Demographic Variables*

	Growth (n = 23)	Non-Growth (n = 16)		
<i>Variables</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>X<sup>2</sup></i>
<b>Age</b>	68.09 (4.55)	71.5(6.31)	1.96	--
<b>Age at start</b>	55.39 (5.87)	60.69 (6.10)	2.74*	--
<b>Gender</b>				.083
Female	9 (39.1%)	7 (43.8%)		
Male	14 (60.9%)	9 (56.3%)	--	
<b>Education</b>				3.55
High School GED	2 (8.7%)	4 (25.0%)	--	
Bachelors	3 (13.0%)	4 (25.0%)		
Masters	12 (52.2%)	5 (31.3%)		
Doctorate or professional degree	6 (26.1%)	3 (18.8%)		
<b>Ethnicity</b>			--	--
White	18 (78.3%)	10 (62.5%)		
Black	3 (13.0%)	3 (18.8%)		
Asian	2 (8.7%)	1 (6.3%)		
Native American/Alaska Native	0	0		
Hispanic/Latino	0	1 (6.3%)		
Middle Eastern	0	1 (6.3%)		

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Note.* Ethnicity did not meet the assumptions for a chi-square test and therefore a significance test was not performed.

Table 3.  
*Integration Code Frequencies and Description*

Code	Primary	Secondary	Total	Description
<b>Virtuous Change</b>				
Transcendence	10	6	16	Discovery of or increase in meaning, spirituality, shift from material
Wisdom	8	3	11	Self knowledge, world knowledge, perspective, open-mindedness
Courage	2	3	5	Bravery, authenticity, persistence
Humanity	2	4	6	More loving, caring, kind, empathetic towards others
Justice	0	2	2	Fairness, teamwork
Temperance	0	2	2	Self-regulation, patience
<b>Other Change</b>				
Validation	2	2	4	Sense of importance or recognition from others
Confidence	2	2	4	Self-assurance, belief in abilities/aptitude
Social	2	2	4	Increased social network and or/connections
Hard Skill	1	1	2	Better public speaker, financial skills
Cog Ability	1	3	4	Focus, sharpened memory
Hedonic Happiness	0	8	8	Satisfaction, joy
Peace	0	2	2	Contented, at peace with life
Engagement	0	2	2	More active, involved, engaged with life
Negative	2	4	6	Cynical, fewer friends, intolerant
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>78</b>	

*Note.* Total is the number of people who mentioned each code.



Table 4.

*Frequencies of High-Point and Low-Point Categories by Growth Group*

	Growth	Non-Growth	Total Sample
<i>Category</i>	(n = 23)	(n = 16)	(n = 39)
<b>High Point</b>			
Support	5 (21.7%)	3 (18.8%)	8 (20.5%)
Recognition	1 (4.3%)	3 (18.8%)	4 (10.3%)
Successful Case	12 (52.2%)	7 (43.8%)	19 (48.7%)
Successful Program	3 (13.0%)	2 (12.5%)	5 (12.8%)
Successful Staff	0 (0.0%)	1 (6.3%)	1 (2.6%)
Other	2 (8.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.1%)
<b>Low Point</b>			
Lack of Support	6 (26.1%)	4 (25.0%)	10 (25.6%)
Opposition	5 (21.7%)	1 (6.3%)	6 (15.4%)
Unsuccessful Case	6 (26.1%)	2 (12.5%)	8 (20.5%)
Unsuccessful Program	1 (4.3%)	4 (25.0%)	5 (12.8%)
Unsuccessful Staff	2 (8.7%)	5 (31.3%)	7 (17.9%)
Other	3 (13.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (7.7%)

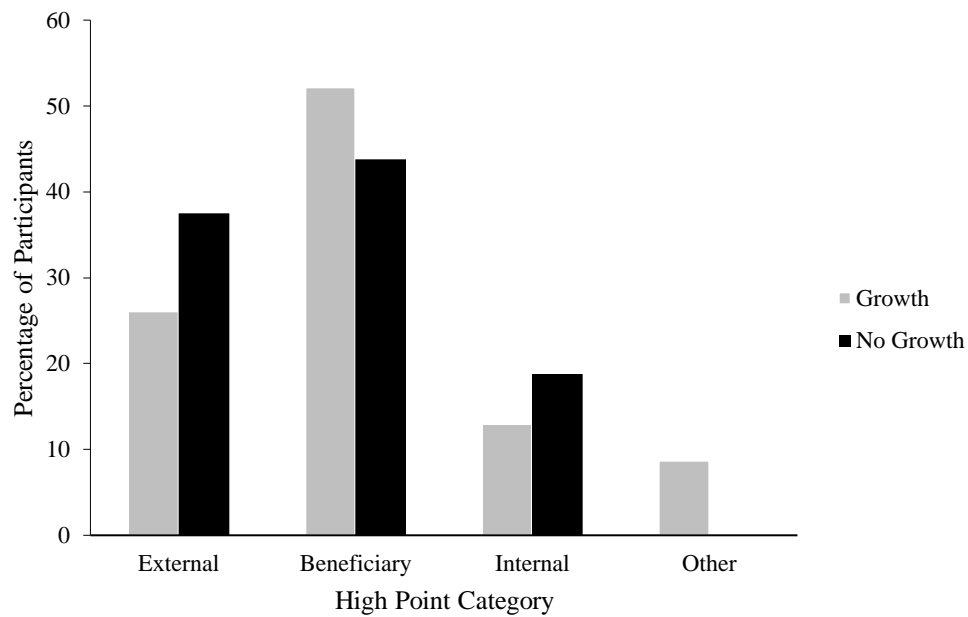
Table 5.

*Frequencies and Chi-Square Comparisons of Integration Across Groups*

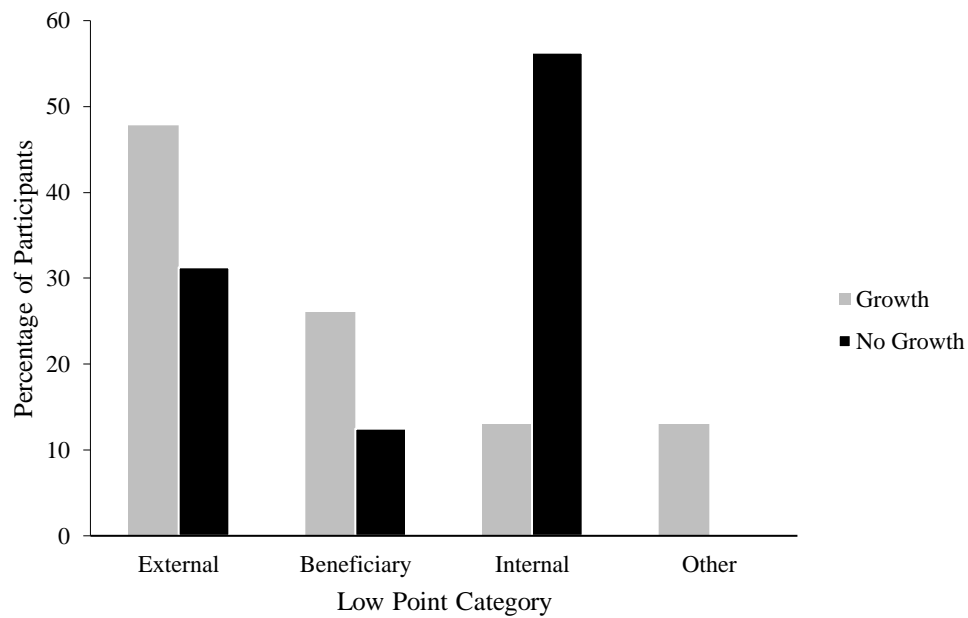
	Growth	Non-Growth	
<i>Variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	$X^2$
<b>High Point</b>			
Integration	17 (73.9%)	3 (18.8%)	11.49**
No Integration	6 (26.1%)	13 (81.3%)	
<b>Low Point</b>			
Integration	13 (56.5%)	1 (6.3%)	10.36**
No Integration	10 (43.5%)	15 (93.8%)	
<b>Overall</b>			
Integration	20 (87.0%)	3 (18.8%)	18.14***
No Integration	3 (13.0%)	13 (81.3%)	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Note.* “Overall” indicates the frequency within each group that had integration in either the high point, low point, or both.



*Figure 1. Percentage of participants across high-point categories by growth group.*



*Figure 2. Percentage of participants across low-point categories by growth group.*