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## A Qualitative Study of Students' Experiences of Adversarial Growth at University

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### **Abstract**

Most people will experience adversity in their lives. Research has shown that people may experience positive growth after an adverse event. University can be an adverse event for students. This study investigates whether students experience adversarial growth because of their university experience and the process by which this growth occurs. Eight participants (five male, three female) took part in semi-structured interviews during which they were asked about their experiences of growth during their time at university. Using thematic analysis, five themes were established from the interviews: 1) Sources of stress, 2) Experience not matching expectations, 3) Areas of positive growth, 4) Areas of negative growth, 5) Coping strategies/support. Results indicated that most participants had experienced adversarial growth.

### **Adversarial Growth**

When people experience negative life events of different extremes, the effects can be positive as well as negative (Sheikh & Marotta, 2005). Traumatic events can lead to positive growth in individuals due to the event challenging the individual's meanings and values in their life and causing them to re-evaluate these meanings and values. Trying to cope with this re-evaluation opens their minds to new perspectives, leading to growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This growth has been variously labelled post-traumatic growth, stress-related growth, positive adjustment, thriving, perceived benefits, positive adaptation, positive by-products and blessings, all of which appear to be describing the same thing which is positive growth after an adverse life event (Linley & Joseph, 2004). This study uses the term adversarial growth as university life does not come under the traditional definition of trauma; therefore, referring to it as post-traumatic growth would not be appropriate.

Adversarial growth consists of changes in five areas: enhanced personal strength, increased spirituality, more appreciation of life, openness to new possibilities and better relationships with others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Enhanced personal strength can be defined as someone being "more vulnerable yet stronger" (Cann & Hanks, 2010: p.127). For example, parents of murdered children reported that they had become more self-confident and self-reliant after their child was murdered (Parapully, Rosenbaum, van den Deale & Nzewi, 2002). Spiritual change refers to an increased spirituality due to the adverse event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Shand, Cowlshaw, Brooker, Burney & Ricciardeli (2015) reported that spirituality and religiosity significantly contributed to the positive growth of patients trying to cope with cancer. Adversity can also lead to a better appreciation of life and make people open to new possibilities for their lives as demonstrated by brain injury patients, studied by Karagiorgou, Evans and Cullen (2018), who reported that "living in the

moment” was an important factor in their lives and how they were more thankful for what they had as a result of their brain injury. They also said that they felt that new possibilities had opened up in their lives. Finally, adversity can lead a better relationship with others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). For example, mothers of children in intensive care became closer to other people in their lives as a result of their child being in intensive care (Affleck, Tennen & Gershman, 1985).

However, adversarial growth is a complex phenomenon. Pollard and Kennedy (2007) found that growth was present 10 years after people had a spinal cord injury, thus demonstrating that growth can have long-lasting effects. On the other hand, Dekel, Ein-Dor and Solomon (2012) researched growth in ex-prisoners of war suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and their results showed that growth decreased over five years even though PTSD levels stayed the same. It is also important to note that growth does not appear to occur because of the event but due to the aftermath of the event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

### **Organismic Valuing Processing Theory**

Organismic valuing processing theory may explain individual differences in growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005). This theory states that human beings naturally want to grow and possess an innate ability to use their psychological experiences to form a sense of self. The theory also states that humans possess the ability to know which direction they want their life to go in, which is known as organismic valuing processing. Individuals who are guided by this process experience greater satisfaction in life, greater well-being and greater life fulfilment. When new information from an adverse event is received which does not conform to their assumptions, people either assimilate the new information meaning they are able to fuse this new information with their pre-existing beliefs. Alternatively, they go

through a process of accommodation where they realize that the new information is incongruent with their existing beliefs. This leads to people changing their views which in turn can lead to positive growth. Whether this accommodation occurs is down to several factors. Firstly, the theory states that the greater difference between the person's assumptions and the information from the adverse event, the greater the potential for a negative reaction to occur. Conversely, if there is little or no difference between a person's assumptions and the new information, they will be more resilient to the effects of the new information. Secondly, the theory states that if an individual's prior needs have been satisfied, that person will be more resilient than somebody whose needs have not been satisfied, making the dissatisfied person more vulnerable to adversity. Thirdly, the theory states that if a person's social environment can meet the needs of the individual then growth will occur. In other words, in the aftermath of the adverse event, if the person does not get the necessary support from the social environment, this will hinder their accommodation of the event and their experience of growth. This theory has been applied usefully to adversarial growth. Wadley, Podlog, Galli and Mellalieu (2016) found that it was helpful in explaining their findings of adversarial growth experienced by their participants following a sporting injury.

### **Adversity and Adversarial Growth at University**

Adversarial growth can occur at many levels (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). University is a major change in the lives of young people (Lu, 1994) and for some students, this transition between adolescence and adulthood can be challenging (Macaskill, 2013). Many factors can contribute to a stressful university experience. For most students, university is their first time moving away from home which means for the first time in their lives they have to be independent including being able to manage their own finances (Scanlon,

Rowling & Weber, 2007). It is also a time when they must make new friends, learn new skills and create a new identity all of which can be stressful (Scanlon et al., 2007). Transitioning from home life to university life, or between years at university can impact on the mental health of young people (Macaskill, 2013). Mental health issues are a major problem in universities and the Insight Network (2019) found that one in five students had been diagnosed with mental health issues, one in three had sought professional help for psychological problems, and around half of students had thoughts of self-harm. Going to university is often a positive experience for students, but it can also be a time of great stress.

Many of the stresses suffered by university students have been shown to give rise to adversarial growth under different circumstances. For example, university is a time when students may lose their identity (Scanlon et al., 2007). Previously, whilst at school or college students would have been taught in relatively small groups and formed close relationships with tutors whereas at university they may be taught with hundreds of others and have limited contact with lecturers. Identity loss can be distressing for the person experiencing it, especially when there is no support for them (Staszewski, 2016). However, it has previously been shown that loss of identity can lead to adversarial growth. Staszewski reported that police officers who were disabled on duty suffered a loss of identity but as time went on, they were able to cope successfully with their identity change and grow.

Another stress suffered by students arises from them losing their social support network from home when they go to university (Scanlon et al., 2007) and this social support has to be rebuilt. Brooks, Graham-Kevan, Robinson and Lowe (2019) studied the effect of mediating psychological factors on people who had previously experienced a traumatic life event. Their results showed that social support has a mediating role in positive growth.

Other research has shown that social support plays a significant role in the wellbeing of students (Stallman, Ohan & Chiera, 2018). The increase in mental health issues at university could also be a potential source of adversarial growth for students as research has demonstrated a relationship between mental health recovery and growth (Slade et al., 2019).

The studies that have been discussed show that there are factors in students' university lives which could potentially cause adversarial growth to occur but there appears to have been very little previous research in this area. Banyard and Cantor (2004) conducted research into students who had experienced trauma before they came to university and those students did experience some positive growth from their trauma. However, in that study, the trauma occurred before the students arrived at university rather than whilst they were at university. There do not appear to have been any studies into whether students experience adversarial growth as a result of stress arising during their time at university.

Supporting students and promoting positive mental health should be a priority for universities. However, a systematic review by Storrie, Ahern and Tuckett (2010) reported found that academic staff often ignored students' emotional problems and labelled them as "behavioral problems", meaning emotional problems were not identified. In addition, academics did not have the skills to be able to deal with the emotional problems of their students. Furthermore, academics had unrealistic expectations of the assistance that local mental health services could provide. This is because local mental health services focus on the health of the student whereas the main focus of the university is on students' academic achievement, meaning there is a lack of understanding between the university and the local mental health service. In a more recent study, Gorczyński, Sims-Schouten, Hill and Wilson (2017) found that students who wanted to get help for issues were more likely to seek help

from family members and friends rather than seek professional help thus showing that students are unsure about using their university support systems for help. Universities need to make student support a priority to enable students to flourish and achieve their educational goals (Storrie et al., 2010) which in turn will contribute to the personal growth of their students.

### **The present study**

Due to its complex nature, adversarial growth is an area that should be explored to gain further understanding. Despite there being much research into this phenomenon, qualitative methods have been underused in studying adversarial growth. Heffernon, Grealy and Mutrie (2009) conducted a meta-analysis and found that out of 57 papers which studied adversarial growth, only three used only qualitative methods. Qualitative research is useful for studying complex phenomena such as adversarial growth in detail. It is also useful for studying new areas of research and conclusions from qualitative research can be used to generate hypotheses which can be used in quantitative research. For these reasons, this study will use qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis, in order to study adversarial growth.

This study has two aims:

- To investigate whether students experience adversarial growth due to their experiences at university.
- If so, to identify the process by which adversarial growth takes place in university students.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from a university in the Midlands region of the United Kingdom. Eight participants (five male and three female) were recruited. They were aged between 20 and 25 years ( $M = 21.13$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ). Participants were recruited from the university's mental health support group for men and through an advertisement on the university's research website. Further participants were also recruited through snowball sampling.

### **Materials**

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview designed to elicit answers to investigate the study's aims (see appendix). It included questions related to the participants' expectations of university, their experiences at university, any change they felt they had experienced whilst being at university and the process by which they felt this change occurred for example the support they received.

### **Procedure**

Ethical approval of this study was granted by the University's School of Psychology Ethics Committee. Participants were invited to take part in a recorded semi-structured interview. Before the interview began the interviewer explained the purpose of the study, how the information provided would remain confidential, the participant's right to withdraw and the right to give only as much information as they wanted. Participants were also informed that they would be given a code name in any report of the study to maintain anonymity. After this, written consent to take part was obtained along with verbal consent for quotes from the interview to be used in the write-up of the report. Participants then took part in the interview which lasted between 30-45 minutes. Finally, after the interview, participants were debriefed and given contact details of organizations they could get in touch with if the interview caused them any stress.

## **Data Analysis**

After each interview was conducted, it was transcribed. Thematic analysis was then used to analyze each transcript following the outline described by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis allows researchers to draw out themes from their research. Codes are the basic element of the data that illustrate information that is of interest to the researcher. In this case, the codes were words or phrases that identified either a change that the participant had experienced or a process by which they felt this change had occurred. Codes were identified from each interview, covering any change that occurred and the process of this change. From these codes, themes were drawn out and these themes were verified by the second author.

## **Results**

Preliminary analysis yielded 79 codes. These codes were then verified by the research supervisor and from them, themes were produced. There were 5 superordinate themes drawn from the codes. The first theme related to the sources of stress caused by the academic and social pressure of university. The second theme related to participants' expectations of university not being matched by their experiences. The third theme related to the positive growth experienced by participants in the areas of resilience, emotional intelligence, independence, appreciation of life/people, growing up and becoming more adult. Participants also reported becoming closer to others and becoming more accepting of who they were. The fourth theme encompassed areas of negative growth experienced by participants. The final theme related to the support participants received from peers and the university itself which facilitated growth. Each of these themes will be expanded on and explained using quotes from participants.

### Sources of stress

Participants referred to stressful events they had experienced at university. These included academic stresses (e.g. exams and assignments), social stresses (e.g. being independent, living away from home for the first time and problems with roommates). They also referred to how personal problems or problems occurring back home had an effect on their university life:

*“Uni in general is just a stress. Different levels of stress, assignments are a stress but they’re a stress to everyone but in terms of my personal life there has been stresses.”*

(P3)

*“Grades like assignments especially exams are a big stress. Also I’ve had stress with housemates in first year I was like living with people I didn’t really get along with and they weren’t very nice, same in second year and having to deal with that and not let it affect my performance and general experience of uni was quite hard.”* (P8)

*“There’s a lot of new people to meet you don’t know what they’re going to be like... there’s obviously home stresses, things like that you think could this thing that has happened at home affect your results at uni.”* (P1)

### Experience not matching expectations

One theme that arose many times from the interviews is that participants had clear expectations of what university was going to be like and those expectations were not matched when they got to university. Participants also spoke about the positive and negative effects of this mismatch:

*"I didn't think I would have to do as much work as I have to do to get through. I thought I was going to be here for the fun and games and going out, I didn't quite expect the amount of work I have to do for assignments and stuff." (P8)*

*"I expected to probably make more friends than I did, and I expected to develop a lot in my views.... I expected to make a lot of friends, no. I made loads of acquaintances, more acquaintances than I think I've ever had in my life at once.... I felt very dislocated, I felt very caught between where I was from and I felt like I didn't quite fit in when I was at home, when I saw my friends from home and I definitely didn't feel like I fitted in with the people at uni mostly. " (P2)*

*"I expected myself to have better time management. I thought I'd be able to hold down two jobs and do university and I just couldn't." (P5)*

Participants talked about the positive effect that this mismatch had on them:

*"I think I'm probably better at independence now because I've got to do things myself. I've got to motivate myself to work it's not like A-Level where they're spoon-feeding you and giving a lot of dates to hand stuff in whereas at uni they give you one date where you've got to hand it all in at once so I think I think I'm a lot better at managing my time and dealing with the stress of getting it all in which is positive I think." (P8)*

Participants also seem to have gone through the process of cognitive dissonance whilst studying at university:

*"My perception of uni was that it was a place to drink rather than a place to learn. Obviously now I'm here I know better but that was definitely the thought that it was somewhere to drink and socialize and sort of stave off the real world for a couple of years but now I sort of see it as a bridge leading between the two but still leaning towards the sort of student life than real life. The perception was not the same as reality. I think for*

*me that's good because I thought I'd be going out more than I wanted to. Whereas when I got here, I realized I had a lot more freedom." (P4)*

*"I've probably gained more confidence in myself by getting grades back that I'm happy with and actually start to believe in myself that I can actually do things." (P8)*

*"I think it's taught me that I'm a lot stronger than I would have given myself credit for in the past. I myself can help myself get over times that are hard." (P6)*

### **Areas of Positive Growth**

Most participants said that they had experienced mostly positive growth in their time at university. They described how their view of themselves and other people had changed. One participant mentioned that they believed that university is an environment where growth can occur:

*"I feel like it is sort of the perfect environment to grow because in a way you grow through suffering." (P4)*

**Resilience/Enhanced Personal Strength.** Participants referred to how they had become more resilient because of university. The focus was on being able to deal with stressors such as receiving a bad grade. They also said they were better able to deal with things that went wrong.

*"Maybe a bit more resilient when it comes to things that I've failed." (P1)*

*"I can roll with the punches." (P6)*

**Emotional Intelligence.** Participants said that their university experience had made them more emotionally intelligent about themselves. They described having developed a better understanding about who they are:

*"I understand myself a lot more." (P5)*

One participant referred to how their struggles at university had made them more aware of their own mental health and how this had made them more empathetic towards other people who struggle with their mental health:

*"More social awareness like mental health awareness." (P3)*

*"So, it does make you more socially aware and mentally you are more aware as well and you reflect it into your friends." (P3)*

*"Helps grow your mental awareness and as you grow you become smarter with yourself in your own mental head you kind of reflect it in other people and you can know where they are at and can help them" (P3)*

*"So those who you know struggle mentally, if you struggle mentally you become closer to them. I feel like that's because you relate to them more and I'm glad I'm closer to them." (P3)*

**Independence.** Participants described how they felt that they had become more independent in areas such as budgeting and being able to look after themselves. In some cases, participants said that they already thought they were independent before university but coming to university proved to themselves that they could be independent:

*"I've grown a lot in independence like I said before I could do all those things, I can look after myself and I feel like I can do those things better because of my experience at uni." (P7)*

*"I've always seen myself as an independent person, but I think coming to uni has proved that I can do things by myself. I can make friends for myself; I can cook, I can keep myself alive." (P6)*

**Appreciation of life/people.** A few participants described becoming more appreciative of things in their lives, for example, their home life and the standard of

cleanliness at home. One participant spoke about how they had become more appreciative of their family and enjoyed spending time with them. This participant also spoke about how they appreciated their friends more from back home. Furthermore, participants said that they had become more appreciative of strangers.

*"What I sort of took for granted at home I really appreciate now because it isn't normal." – talking about cleanliness (P4)*

*"Spending time with my family because before I moved out, I was very ready to leave and was like getting annoyed with everything they do whereas now when I see them, I enjoy it so much more and I spend so much more quality time with my family rather than just going and sitting in my room all the time which I used to do." (P8)*

*"I'm more appreciative of my friends back home who I don't really see a lot of and that they were actually good friends." (P8)*

*I appreciate people more individually than I did before." (P5)*

**Being closer to other people/Better relationships with others.** Some participants spoke about how their relationship with other people in their lives had improved and they had become closer to them as a result of university. They mentioned how they had become closer to specific family members and friends:

*"I've actually become closer to my mum since being at uni." (P6)*

*"Specific people yeah.... So, there's my group of mates back home and there's three of us in a group of 8 that struggle mentally so I've become closer to them two." (P3)*

**Realizing what is important in a relationship.** Participants said that during their time at university their view on relationships had changed and they had realized what was important to them in a relationship:

*"I think the people I associated with in first year cared a lot more about the perception of the outside world. I'm not friends with anyone now who would put looking cool in front of people over having a good time. It's a more relaxing atmosphere." (P6)*

*"I think at the end of first year you realize who your actual friends are and who will stick by your side throughout the process and those people are still with me today at the end of third year." (P7)*

**Acceptance of self.** Participants mentioned how they have become more self-accepting in their time at university:

*"I've become less self-conscious about it and more accepting of not being a particularly social person." (P4)*

*"My self-perception of me is more positive than when I came. I find it easier to say more good things and I could still list off a lot of bad things. Before coming to uni, that list would have been bad or just general things about myself. I'm a lot surer of myself." (P6)*

**Changing of life goals/identity/ New possibilities.** One participant spoke about how their time at university had made them realize what they want to do in the future. They also spoke about how their opinion had changed about how much control they had over their own future and how they had realized that they had more control over their future than they had originally thought:

*"I think I've realized who I actually want to be when I come out of university." (P7)*

*"So I came here and after three years I've definitely understood what I don't like and what I actually really enjoy." (P7)*

*"A big life lesson for me it has taught me is be your own person. So it's like don't just think your whole life is set out for you in a way so it has basically made me realize life*

*is a journey and you can decide your future after uni and you can do that and no one else can.” (P7)*

**Growing up/Becoming More Adult.** Participants spoke about how their university experience had helped them become an adult:

*“I’ve grown quite a bit in important aspects of adult life.” (P4)*

Participants also spoke about the life lessons and life skills which university had taught them:

*“Just more mature I think living away from your parents forces you grow up and just handle life. I’m better with money since coming to uni because I used to just buy anything whereas now, I can stick to a budget and only buy things that I need which is a skill you need for life.” (P8)*

*“Living away from your parents in particular with me it’s helped me understand that I can live away from them and that I don’t have to be going home all the time so essentially it’s helped me become an adult because you’re out on your own doing something for yourself.”(P7)*

**Views on other people.** One participant talked about how their opinion on men and their views on mental health had changed as a result of university and how they now saw men as more accepting of mental health issues than they did before. This was due to them being part of a male mental health support group. Also, they touched on how they now felt that they could talk to other people about their problems unlike before they came to university:

*“I definitely see men as much more accepting of mental health than I previously thought.” (P4)*

*"Talking to people because I never talked to people about my mental state before I came to uni and that's the biggest one.... it was nice to know that factor that I can just to talk to people and that can calm me down so that's the biggest change" (P4)*

### **Areas of Negative Change**

Despite most participants saying that the majority of their change had been positive, one participant said that they had grown more negatively as a result of university. They described how they felt that the negative change in themselves outweighed the positive change. They said that when it came to independence they had changed negatively. They also said that they did not believe university had made them a more resilient person and they mentioned the university when describing why this change had occurred:

*"Independence wise I'd say negative. Yeah that's probably how I'd put it. If you ask me the questions "do you think uni has made me a stronger person?" Then I would probably say no, in some aspects yeah but in general no not at all in anything it's probably made it worse." (P3)*

*"I don't know I think the university system is just weird while there is wellbeing, it doesn't seem to make you a stronger person. It just feels like college or GCSEs "we'll get you in, we'll help you get your grades then get lost." They don't really care about who you are, you're just a number. That's how the whole education system feels to me. Student wellbeing I'll give the exception to because they're not in the academic system but the actual teaching don't care about the person. "We'll get you your degree because it makes the uni look good." (P3)*

*"I feel like lecturers are just less interested in, to me it just feels like they are running the machine in a way." (P3)*

Other participants who said they had grown positively also mentioned that they had negatively grown in some aspects of themselves:

*"I've become less trusting of people." (P4)*

*"Don't think my social side has improved if anything it's gotten worse but I don't think by any significant amount." (P4)*

*"I'm probably lazier than I realized I was when it comes to like getting up and making it to a 9am or getting up and motivating myself to do work and exercise and eating healthily at uni it's hard because at home I didn't have a choice because my mum was there and was like "get up" but when I'm by myself I am quite lazy and I didn't think I was." (P8)*

One participant said that they had grown positively but also referred to the negative aspects of their university experience.

*"So overall I've changed positively but not without getting worse along the way" (P4)*

### **Coping Strategies/Support**

**University support.** Participants mentioned how the university supported them during their times of stress. One participant spoke about how they asked their lecturers for advice after they had failed an exam. One participant spoke about the importance of the Students' Union support. Others spoke about the services provided by the Student Wellbeing Service specifically a support group they set up:

*"Followed what uni said and also lecturers' advice... When you talk to lecturers, they kind of reassure you... You take their advice, you do what they say mainly" (P1)*

*"My support group did help because it was an outlet for just the stress and frustration of everyday life." (P4)*

*"So the SU definitely help you as well they give you academic support, mental health, mental health's a big one so we have the peace of mind society and that makes a massive difference to your mental wellbeing because you get points where your mental wellbeing is awful and I think it's important to have those services on campus." (P7)*

**Peer support.** Participants placed emphasis on how certain people, especially friends, helped them cope with the stress of university. Participants also mentioned how everyone going through the same stress helped them cope with their own stress:

*"So, I felt very lost for a time but subsequently upon realizing that everyone felt like that to a certain degree I felt loads better about that." (P2 - talking about moving away from home)*

*"Everyone is in the same boat kind of thing...I think everyone encourages each other in their group if you like." (P1)*

*"We're all in this together as such and it's like because of that you feel part of a community and you feel like you're not the only person struggling with that issue." (P7)*

*"I think in particular a close group of friends have picked me up when I am down and they have picked me up and told me "you are this, you are this" and when someone says that to you, you start believing it and having that close knit group of friends it's kind of like it makes you realize you can do better." (P7)*

## **Discussion**

This study investigated the adversarial growth of university students as a result of their university experience. The two aims of the study were to discover whether students experienced adversarial growth and if so the process by which this growth occurred. The study confirmed that university is a stressful time for students with academic and social

pressures potentially causing significant negative mental health effects in students. This is in line with other research which has highlighted that university is a particularly stressful time for students. Denovan & Macaskill (2017) found high stress levels did not change over time in first year students. The participants in this study were mainly second and third-year students, confirming that stress continues throughout university life. The stress of university can hinder students' academic performance as well as having a significant effect on their diet (Universities UK, 2017). This shows the importance of universities supporting their students and helping them to manage stress.

### **Adversarial Growth in Students**

The results indicate that students do experience positive psychological growth (adversarial growth) during their time at university in several areas. In this study students indicated that they had become more resilient since being at university. Resilience is critical to the ability to recover from stressful or adverse situations (DeRosier, Frank, Schwartz & Leary, 2013). Resilience and adversarial growth have been shown to have a significant relationship (Zhang et al., 2019). Resilience has been recognized by students as a key factor in a successful university experience (Holdsworth & Turner, 2018). The transition between school and university is difficult for some students leading to poorer academic results (DeRosier, Frank, Schwartz & Leary, 2013). Universities can help contribute to the wellbeing of students by facilitating resilience building behaviors through their policies and placing emphasis on building resilience in their support systems e.g. counselling services (Turner, Scott-Young & Holdsworth, 2017).

The majority of participants also reported that they had become more emotionally intelligent during their time at university). Tuck & Patlamazoglou (2019) suggested that there is a relationship between positive psychological change and emotional intelligence

and reported that levels of emotional intelligence increased after an adverse life event. Emotional intelligence has been shown to be a key factor in students' success at university; secondary school students with low emotional intelligence were more likely to drop out of university than their peers with high levels of emotional intelligence (Dave, Keefer, Snetsinger, Holden & Parker, 2019). Stress management, interpersonal skills and adaptability were significant factors in predicting a successful transition to university. Dave et al. (2019) demonstrated that emotional intelligence is a key trait required by students to be able to cope with their university experience. In this current study, participants who reported a growth in emotional intelligence also reported adversarial growth. Furthermore, the themes of resilience, being closer to others and being more appreciative of life and people validates some of the areas of growth outlined by Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996). However, it is important to note that some of the areas of growth discussed were only demonstrated by one or a few participants. More research into these themes is required to further validate them.

### **Cognitive Dissonance**

One theme that was clear from the interviews was that when participants came to university, they went through a process of cognitive dissonance. As already discussed, university is a massive change in students' lives, with many stresses including academic and social pressures. Before they came to university, participants demonstrated that they had clear expectations of what university was going to be like. However, all participants said that university did not match their expectations. This mismatch caused the process of cognitive dissonance to occur. This dissonance can have positive and negative effects. Positively, it can cause growth to occur. However, it can also have a negative effect if students feel unprepared or overwhelmed by what they experience. It was also clear that social support

from the university and peers can help facilitate growth as well. The different impacts of cognitive dissonance could be accounted for by organismic valuing processing theory in that a negative outcome is more likely if the difference between expectations and reality is great; if they feel their needs have not been satisfied; or if they do not have the necessary support from their social environment.

### **Social Support**

Another finding of this study was that social support is a significant factor in helping participants cope with the stress as well as helping them grow as people. Previous research has shown that social support can significantly assist adversarial growth. Brooks, Graham-Kevan, Robinson & Lowe, (2019) found that social support significantly mediated adversarial growth after interpersonal trauma. The idea that social support decreases psychological vulnerability has been well-established (Thoits, 1984). Among university students, social support from friends has been found to help students adjust to university better (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak & Cribble, 2007), while that social support from friends and family can significantly protect students from negative mental health issues (Alsubaie, Stain, Webster & Wadman, 2019). The current study provides further evidence that social support from peers helps students cope with their university experience which in turn contributes to adversarial growth in students. Further research is needed to determine why social support is key in the process of adversarial growth in university students.

### **Negative Growth**

Another interesting finding from this study was that one participant felt that they had experienced negative growth whilst being at university. This result is not surprising as Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) state that positive growth is not certain after an adverse event and some people show little or no growth after the event. This participant also criticized the

university during their interview talking about how they felt that the university did not care for their wellbeing. As previously discussed, social support plays a significant role in adversarial growth and that a lack of it can cause significant negative effects

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, limitation of this study is the small sample size. The sample size of this study was only eight; therefore, it is difficult to generalize these results to the rest of the student population. Another limitation was that this was not a longitudinal study which meant that this study was unable to investigate the long-term effects of university and also cannot conclude whether the negative experiences and effects of university turned into positive growth for participants eventually. In particular, it is not possible to theorize that the one participant in this study who reported negative growth would experience positive growth in the future.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of students' university experiences specifically investigating the possibility of the negative growth experienced becoming more positive at some point.

Further research should also be conducted to identify students who are less likely experience positive growth. This would assist university support systems as they would be able to more easily identify and assist students at risk of experiencing negative growth. For example, Steptoe, Tsuda and Tanaka (2007) found that students from poorer economic backgrounds showed more depressive symptoms compared to their peers. Their results also showed that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds felt that they had little control over their lives. These students should be identified by universities and given the

support that they need otherwise as the research discussed shows, they are susceptible to the negative effects of university whereas with the correct support, they could potentially go through adversarial growth.

### **Conclusion**

This study researched university students' experiences of adversarial growth as a result of stress during their time at university. The results of this study show that students do experience adversarial growth as a direct result of their experiences. It also demonstrates that university students are a population who can experience this growth. The results from this study can be used to improve student mental health services by bringing to light the phenomena of adversarial growth and the process by which it occurs. Using these results, universities can tailor their support systems in order to help identify those who may be more or less likely to experience it. This identification process would allow them to help those less likely and universities could be able to facilitate growth by using the causes of adversarial growth as outlined in this study.

Thematic analysis was used in this study as there has been a lack of qualitative methods used in adversarial growth research (Hefferon, Grealy & Mutrie, 2009). The current study has demonstrated that thematic analysis is a useful tool in studying adversarial growth. Thematic analysis is a simple process which is clear to follow and easy to use, and its results are easy for non-professionals to read (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). This is essential for the current study as it means that the results can be easily interpreted by universities.

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**Appendix: Interview Questions**

1) Did the process of coming to university cause you a significant amount of stress that caused you to view yourself, others and/or the world in a more positive way?

- How similar is your university life to your home life?
- Do you think you have adjusted well to university?
- Is university what you expected it to be like?
- What was your expectations?
- What matched or didn't match your expectations?

If it didn't match

- Did this cause you any stress? – Why?
- What did you do to cope with this?
- What specific coping strategies did you use? – Did they help?
- Did this mismatch cause a positive change in the way you see yourself, others and the world?
- Did your coping strategies help cause this change? – If so which ones and why?

2) Since starting at university have you experienced any other events that caused you a significant amount of stress and which caused you to view yourself, others and/or the world in a more positive way?

- How has your university experience been so far? Any stressful events?

- 

Tell me about what happened:

- Why was it stressful? What was the most stressful thing about it?
- Why do you think that was particularly stressful?
- What did that event mean to you?
- What was your immediate reaction to the event?

How do you think it changed the way you saw yourself, other people or the world?

- Was this a gradual or immediate change?
- How long did the effect of this event last for?
- Was it a positive change?
- How long after did you start feeling positive about this event?
- What affected this change?
- Were there particular events that affected it?
- Were there particular people or relationships that affected it?
- Was there anything about the particular situation you were in that affected it?

For stressful events that happened after you started university

- When did this event happen?
- Do you think your reaction to this event was affected by the changes of starting at university? If so, how?

